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Allegiances

[image]

RiverClan

Leader :

Pinestar - brown and white tom

Deputy :

Salmonskip - gray and white tom with dark tabby stripes

Medicine Cat:

Wishfern - white she-cat with amber eyes

Warriors:

Crowspots - old gray and white she-cat with dark patches
Apprentice: Toadpaw

Paledusk - pale gray tom with amber eyes

Dappledfang - cream and brown dappled tom
Apprentice: Owlpaw

Heatfur - ginger tabby she-cat

Aspentail - light gray tom with a thin white tail

Lionpoppy - pale brown tabby she-cat

Sorrelmouse - red she-cat with a white underbelly
Apprentice: Silverpaw

Spiderfrost - pale ginger she-cat with blue-speckled eyes

Cloudgaze - pale brown tom with silvery gray eyes

Stonefur - dark gray tom

Lightfern - cream tabby she-cat with white paws

Nightpatch - black patched tom with green eyes
Apprentice: Lichenpaw

Minnowstripe - tabby tortoiseshell she-cat
Apprentice: Mistpaw

Wolfpounce - thick-furred dark gray tom

Robinleap - red-brown tom

Honeywhisker - yellow tom with amber eyes

Swimleap - silver and white she-cat

Nosefleck - gray and white she-cat with a white-tipped nose

Queens:

Quietoak - light brown tabby she-cat *(mother to Finchkit and Pigeonkit)*

Apprentices:

Silverpaw - silver tabby she-cat

Owlpaw - brown tabby tom

Lichenpaw - black and white she-cat with striking blue eyes

Mistpaw - pure black she-cat with a splotch of white on her muzzle

Toadpaw - black and white tom

Elders:

Ravenfire - black she-cat

Sandytail - pale ginger and white speckled tom

Nightfur - gray and white tabby she-cat

ShadowClan

Leader:

Cloudstar - ginger and white tom

Deputy :

Mossrunner - pale brown patched tom

Medicine Cat:

Fawnsky - light ginger she-cat with white paws

Warriors:

Gingerfang - massive ginger tabby tom with long, sharp teeth

Deerflake - brown patched she-cat

Firesnap - fiery ginger she-cat

Echoclaw - black and white tom

Bluedawn - silver spotted she-cat with blue eyes
Apprentice: Darkpaw

Twigpool - brown tom

Sapfur - light cream she-cat with bright blue eyes

Sparrowshade - gray tabby tom

Fallenbreeze - gray tabby she-cat

Aspensky - pale brown she-cat

Covestalker - dark red tom

Flashfur - light ginger tom

Beetlemask - black she-cat

Evefrost - russet she-cat, *formerly RiverClan*

Queens:

Fleckface - white and gray she-cat

Apprentices:

Frostpaw - white tom

Whirlpaw - light gray tabby tom

Darkpaw - sleek black she-cat

ThunderClan

Leader:

Smokestar - massive gray tom

Deputy:

Sandpounce

Medicine Cat:

Tigerpatch
Apprentice: Icepaw

Warriors:

Lakecatcher

Grassears

Pouncefoot
Apprentice: Ravenpaw

Moonblossom

WindClan

Leader:

Burrstar - golden tabby she-cat

Deputy:

Panthershade

Medicine Cat:

Swiftpetal

Warriors:

Dawndapple

Bristlewhisker

Redstorm

Volescratch

Chapter One

[image]

Claws flashed and yowls split the air.

Silverpaw spun around, thrashing the hide of one of the hundreds of rogues who poured around her. She fought with the full might of StarClan, every move as fast as lightning and as fearless as a howling storm as the onslaught of enemies continued.

A faint, painless itch caught her attention as a tom scored his claws across her flank. She spun around to face him, her lips peeled back in a snarl. With a raucous battle cry, she pounced at the tom, wrapping her claws around his shoulders and tackling him to the ground.

"This is RiverClan land!" Silverpaw crowed. She tore her claws along the faceless tom's stomach as he kicked and squirmed.

The rogue's claws thrashed against her belly fur. What should have been painful slices of agony instead felt like nothing but the stir of a breeze. Silverpaw was *unstoppable.* Victoriously, she slackened her iron grip, allowing the tom to run free. Her silver tabby tail spun in eager circles against the dust behind her.

A grin curled across her lips. She watched him flee with his tail tucked between his legs, straight into a screen of brambles. The rogue screeched as thorns scraped at his already battered pelt.

"Well done, Silverpaw."

Silverpaw spun around. Her golden eyes stretched wide in awe as they alighted upon the magnificent form of Pinestar, RiverClan's leader.

The brown tom stood gloriously before the sun, silhouetted by brilliant beams of golden sunlight. His thin brown fur rippled like liquid in a gentle breeze, and with a mighty yowl, he leaped from

his perch and descended to the forest floor. At the thud of his paws, the clearing fell silent.

Just like that, the rogues were gone.

"You have succeeded in defending your Clan," Pinestar declared, his leaf-green eyes glowing with pride. Silverpaw squirmed with excitement, but as the imposing tom approached, she sucked in her breath, proudly puffed out her chest, and allowed her body to fall still. Pinestar's muzzle touched the crest of her forehead. "In recognition of your excellent battle skills, I declare you, Silverpaw, the bravest, most fiercest warrior of RiverClan, if not of the entire lake. By the powers of StarClan, I grant you your warrior name. Congratulations, Silver..."

Suddenly, the world tilted at a sharp angle. Shadows bled across the beautiful greens and golds of the earth, and as Silverpaw's stomach twisted at the imbalance, she cried out, "Wait! What's my warrior name?"

She lashed out at the inky darkness. The shadows devoured her paws, sweeping over her fur and spinning her around and around until nausea overbeared her. Panic consumed her every thought, and with a heaving gasp, she scrambled to her paws. Soft moss tore beneath her claws, and little pink shells nipped painfully at her scrabbling pads.

Her heart reeled as her eyes rapidly adjusted to the moonlit darkness. She sucked in a deep breath to calm her rapid heartbeat as the surroundings around her familiarized themselves. She plopped her haunches to the soft moss of her nest.

"Great StarClan," she muttered, giving her chest fur a brisk lick as weariness swept over her. "It was only a dream!"

Her golden eyes flitted around the den. The four other occupants dozed peacefully, all except for Lichenpaw, whose sleep-talking never seemed to cease. Once Silverpaw reassured herself that her rambunctious awakening hadn't disturbed her sleeping denmates, she visibly relaxed, and her thoughts meandered back to the dream.

Her claws itched for a battle. A *real* one that she could win, just as she had done in the dream. The imaginary war she'd brewed up, her faux warrior ceremony, and the sense of victory over such a grand success—of beating hundreds upon hundreds of rogues, all on her own! It filled her heart with pride and excitement.

As she relived the fantasy through her mind's eye, an idea slithered into her thoughts. With a sly smile, Silverpaw crept from her shell-strewn nest.

"Owlpaw!" She hissed.

Her brother's nest was only about a tail-length away. It was made of moss just like hers, but rather than woven with pretty pink shells, sparkly silver fish scales dappled through the spongy material. Silverpaw stretched a paw forward and prodded Owlpaw's tabby flank.

"Owlpaw, wake up!"

The tom stirred briefly, but with a little snuffle, he buried his nose deeper into the moss.

Silverpaw's whiskers twitched in amusement. She slightly budded her claws out of their sheathes. She kneaded his side more firmly, her claws pricking at his skin, but carefully enough to not draw any blood. Owlpaw growled, his fur twitching away from her claws, though his eyes remained pressed shut.

Silverpaw hissed softly and pressed more firmly.

"Oh, for StarClan's sake!" Owlpaw lurched around, his golden eyes fiery as he glared at Silverpaw. "What do you *want?"*

Silverpaw grinned, continuing to knead his fur out of excitement rather than persistence now that she had garnered his attention. "Something amazing happened," she thrummed.

"What is it?" Owlpaw snarled, reeling away from her. "And cut that out before I claw your ears off!"

Silverpaw let out a startled *mrrow* as her brother slashed his claws

at her feet. She skipped away and began to work at the ground instead with a roll of her eyes. "Fine, fine, I'll stop, but only because you're listening!"

Owlpaw snorted as he sat up in his nest. He shook out his pelt, little flakes of moss tumbling to the ground. A large clump, however, had weeded its way into his fur, and he twisted his neck around to pull it out. The green wad fell quietly to the ground.

"Well?" He prompted, golden eyes flashing to Silverpaw. "What's so important that you couldn't wait for the morning?"

"I had a really exciting dream!" Silverpaw purred in delight, her tail whipping around in excitement.

"Keep it down, the others are sleeping!" Owlpaw tapped a paw on her nose. "And seriously? A *dream?* I need to go fishing before dawn, but you woke me up—in the middle of the night, might I add—because you were too excited about a figment of your imagination?"

"Well, when you put it that way..." Silverpaw frowned. "No, stop being a bird in a burrow, Owlpaw. I had a dream where I fought off an army of rogues!"

Owlpaw stared at her pointedly.

Silverpaw spluttered, "I fought off rogues in my dream, but this morning, I also caught the scent of rogues on the border!" She hesitated, screwing up her face in a determined scowl. "Owlpaw, this is a sign from StarClan. We need to find these rogues and fight them off, just like I did in my dream."

"You found rogue scent on the border?" Owlpaw frowned. "Why didn't you tell anybody about it?"

Silverpaw twitched her whiskers. "I planned to, fish-brain," she retorted. "Not now, though. StarClan sent me this dream, so we have to fulfill it!"

Owlpaw rolled his eyes and flopped back into his nest. "Absolutely not. This isn't one of Sandytail's stories, Silverpaw. Believe it or not,

but this is *reality*." Owlpaw raised his paws to the air and flexed them half-heartedly. "Only medicine cats get visions. The only thing I *need* to do is get some sleep so I can impress Dappledfang in the morning."

"But Owlpaw!" Silverpaw whined.

Owlpaw rolled onto his side, turning his back to her. He thrust his muzzle deep into the moss of his nest. "I said *no*."

Silverpaw pressed her belly to the ground and leaned close to him. "It was a vision from StarClan."

"Why would StarClan want to talk to you of all cats?"

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"Figure it out, fish-brain."

Silverpaw huffed as silence reigned. Her brother's flank rose and fell steadily, yet, he was still clearly awake. His ears kept twitching.

"We'll get back in time," Silverpaw began cautiously. "I'll make sure you can return to your nest and get some sleep before Dappledfang comes looking for you. And if I mess this up somehow, I promise I'll take the blame and do your chores for the next moon. But please," she begged, "I *really* want to do this." In a last ditch effort, she added, "If we succeed, we might even get our warrior names early."

Owlpaw breathed sharply through his nose. He craned his neck to peek over his shoulder. Silverpaw's heart skipped.

"Owlpaw?" She prompted, hardly able to hide the quiver of excitement from her voice.

"*Fine,"* Owlpaw grunted at last.

Silverpaw yipped with delight, but she was quickly silenced as Owlpaw snarled and slapped his tail over her mouth.

"Don't get me wrong, I'm *not* doing this because I want to. I'm only going so you can fulfill your 'prophecy'," his voice dripped with

sarcasm, but Silverpaw barely heard him. All she could think of was that they were actually going.

Though the two had gotten into mischief many times throughout their lives, they'd never done something so nefarious. Sneaking out of camp in the middle of the night, based on what was *possibly* a prophetic dream—though she knew the possibility, truly, was slim—was the perfect adventure.

"And remember, once dawn is near, we need to return so I don't get into any trouble."

Silverpaw shook from her thoughts and brushed her nose happily against Owlpaw's. "Yeah, yeah, I get it," she purred as she pulled away. "Let's go already! The night only lasts so long."

Owlpaw heaved himself out of his nest, leaving a deep imprint in the moss. He pointedly gave an unamused twitch of his whiskers. Silverpaw smiled in return. With a brisk shake of her fur, she wove carefully around their sleeping denmates. She reached the den entrance without incident.

She cast one final glance back at the sleeping cats. She was tempted to wake Mistpaw and bring the cheerful black she-cat with them, but the sharp glare from Owlpaw told her otherwise. She tore her eyes away with a soft sigh. With Owlpaw as tired and grouchy as he was, he would never agree to go if she added another accomplice to their mission.

The soft, bubbling current of the river was a constant in the RiverClan camp, and as she pricked her ears to the sounds outside, the wonderful noise berated her ears. It was their namesake, after all. The water that surrounded the small island formed a natural defense against the enemy Clans who dared not get their paws wet.

Peeking past the wall of braided reeds, Silverpaw surveyed the clearing. The opening was lit by stray rays of moonlight that peeked through the lour and forest canopy, casting a sheen of silvery light throughout the camp. Dark, puffy clouds crept across the sky. Combined with the heavy taste of rain in the air and a gentle rumble of thunder in the distance, they foretold a storm.

A swathe of clouds flitted across the moon, bathing the forest in complete darkness. Silverpaw shivered until the light reappeared.

Her eyes strayed to the camp entrance, the only exit she knew of. To her dismay, she spotted a shadowy figure huddled underneath a small overhanging shelter of reeds, his amber eyes cast away from the clearing.

"Mouse-dung," Silverpaw cursed softly, at last careful to keep her voice low. "Stonefur's guarding the entrance."

Owlpaw squeezed up beside her, his reluctance forgotten. His golden eyes narrowed in thought.

"Over there," Owlpaw said at last, gesturing to a cluster of reeds in the far corner of camp. "In the dirtplace."

Silverpaw's eyes widened in surprise. "The dirtplace? Why there?"

Owlpaw smirked. "There's a gap in the reeds," he explained, ducking low to peek past her. "Unless somebody repaired it, that's where we can sneak out."

Silverpaw dubiously narrowed her eyes. "Lead the way, then."

With the ease of practice, Owlpaw slipped past his sister and into the moonlight. The clearing dipped into darkness, and when the light returned, Owlpaw was already creeping along the fringes of camp.

Silverpaw quickly scampered after him, though she kept her paws light. She caught up to the tabby tom and cast a wary eye back to the camp entrance. Stonefur had not moved. Her paws twitched nervously. *Is he asleep?* She wondered, though the curious thought was quickly dismissed when she noticed the warrior's ears flicking alertly.

Silverpaw ripped her gaze away. At last, the two apprentices reached the dirtplace. Large ferns draped overhead, and the shrubbery was tightly intertwined to keep the stench at bay. Silverpaw crinkled her nose as she stepped inside.

"So, where is it?" She asked, scanning the walls as she tried to spot the hole her brother had spoken of. She could see nothing out of the ordinary.

Owlpaw flicked his tail absently and padded to the furthermost corner of the smelly den. The tom pressed his muzzle against a cluster of woven reeds, and with a push, the portion of the wall gave way. Silverpaw's eyes widened in surprise as he disappeared through the now gently flapping ferns.

With her heart hammering in excitement, Silverpaw rushed forth—dodging around the piles of dung—and examined the gap in the wall. The hole was rather small, tattered at the edges as if it were munched away by caterpillars. It was difficult to spot at a mere glance, as a large cluster of ferns dangled over it, but undoubtedly, it was present. She pushed the dangling leaves aside and crawled into the gap.

Silverpaw wriggled around for a few moments until she finally squeezed through. She gasped in the pure air. A cool spray of chilly water sprinkled down from the sky and wet her fur, washing away the putrid dirtplace odor.

Flicking her whiskers, she turned to face her brother. "How did you know about that?" She asked, studying him curiously.

Owlpaw shrugged, not meeting her gaze. "I have my ways."

"Right." Silverpaw shook out her fur, which did nothing, as the rain was beginning to pick up. "Well, follow me!"

The silver tabby raced along the outskirts of the camp wall. A barrier of reeds twisted along the bank of the river, hardly giving the apprentices enough room to walk on the damp ground. She carefully placed her paws, one in front of the other, and with little effort, they reached the crossing stones. She shot a glance to the camp entrance. They were just out of view of Stonefur's watchful eye, but the stones were well within his sight.

Silverpaw crouched down with a frown. She glanced back at her brother and shook her head wordlessly. He nodded in

understanding, and flicked his tail to the river, tilting his head in silent question. Silverpaw stared for a moment. Not bothering to reply, she plowed into the mud and waded into the river.

The current was mild, but certainly strengthening underneath the growing rainfall. She paddled with fervor, and with a few swift kicks, her paws brushed against pebbles ground. She scrambled onto the bank on the other side and again shook out her fur, more out of practice than anything. She waited a heartbeat longer for her brother to join her on the shore.

Eagerly, Silverpaw continued to lead Owlpaw along, further and further into the woods. The two cats bounded across streams and waded through shallow rivers. As they left earshot of the camp, they stripped themselves of their caution to move far more quickly. Thunder crashed as the storm above grew more intense, and a blinding flash of lightning split across the sky. Silverpaw jumped as, combined with the earsplitting noise, an owl shrieked in the far distance. The apprentices exchanged frightened glances, and continued on.

Finally, they reached the edge of RiverClan's hunting grounds. The scentline was difficult to pinpoint through the heavy precipitation, though it unfailingly cast an invisible barrier before the apprentices. Silverpaw trotted along the border, her nose to the ground.

"I swear, I smelled them just along here," she muttered, her eyes darting along. There, just over the border, resided a rotten tree stump, exactly where she remembered it.

"Maybe we should just head back," Owlpaw ventured cautiously, racing to keep up with her.

Silverpaw whirled around with an irritated hiss, "I know you want to sleep, Owlpaw, but *come on!* We're already out here. Where's the harm in trying?"

Owlpaw flinched, and Silverpaw withered beneath the hurt in his eyes. As she studied his expression, she realized with a start that there was a twinkle of fear in his gaze.

"Owlpaw?" She asked gingerly. "What's the matter?"

Owlpaw sighed. "I don't know, Silverpaw. Maybe we should just leave this to Pinestar; let him know that you suspect rogues have been scouting the border, then the warriors can deal with it." He blinked. "We're only apprentices, after all. What are we meant to do against full-grown rogues?"

Silverpaw furrowed her brow. "You're an amazing fighter, Owlpaw," she pointed out. "For StarClan's sake, even Salmonskip has a hard time beating you in a training session—and he's the Clan deputy! We'll be fine, I'm sure of it."

Owlpaw's tail drooped. "I just have this awful feeling that something's going to go terribly wrong."

Silverpaw took a moment to fully consider her brother. His fur was soaked and dripping with rainwater. He was shivering with cold—and she realized that she was shivering as well. And his eyes... his eyes were shadowed with a deep-seated fear. *Fear of what?*

She sighed. "I guess we could..." she began, but her voice cut off to a gasp before she could finish. A scent tickled her nostrils. It was revolting in flavor, but it had the tangy, undeniable smell of cat beneath it. She planted her feet against the ground, her fur spiking with delight, her moment of revelation forgotten. "Owlpaw!" She exclaimed, lashing her tail. "It's here, we found the scent!"

Without waiting for his response, she followed the trail. Whoever this cat was, they had clearly stepped over the scentline and trespassed into RiverClan territory, but only for a few moments. She crossed over the border with ease, though her pelt ruffled slightly at the realization that she'd left her homeland. The safety of the border she never dared infringe.

She tested the air. The tracks led off into the woods beyond Clan land.

"We'll catch these trespassers, Owlpaw!" Silverpaw cried, whirling around to face the tom who trailed reluctantly along behind her. Eagerly, she leaped atop the tree stump, her claws splayed across

the slimy, rotten material as she raised her tail above her head. "We'll find them, and show them exactly why they shouldn't have crossed into our territory. And when we do," she met her golden eyes to her brother's matching ones, "Pinestar will have no choice but to make us warriors early."

At those words, thunder resonated around them with a flash of bright, white light, as though StarClan themselves were watching.

❀

Merry Christmas everybody, and thank you for reading the first chapter of Silverjaw's Sorrow! For now, this is all you'll be getting, but don't fret! I've finished the story, and am simply working on revisions before uploading the rest. In the future, likely early 2022, I will have a biweekly posting schedule—one chapter every Monday and Friday. You can see the story's progress in my bio.

If you enjoyed this chapter, be sure to give it a vote and comment your feedback. I love any and all support, and of course, a healthy dosage of constructive criticism.

Thank you again for reading, and I look forward to sharing the rest of this story with you.

See you soon! ~ Kitten

❀

Update (Sept. 26th, 2022):
Hey guys, I'm so sorry for the prolonged delay in posting this story, but it's still chugging along! Unfortunately, however, we're facing another delay, as it's being rewritten... again, due to some big changes to the story.

Due to this, this chapter has been updated to the latest revision.

Be sure to add the story to your library so you can be notified when updates begin! Additionally, you can follow along with the progress and big milestones on my bio and on my

announcements page. I can't wait to share this story with you guys, and I truly appreciate your patience! <3

❀

WARNING : There are dark themes and violence/death included in this story, as is typical of Warriors. If you cannot handle this type of content, you're welcome to leave. Otherwise, please enjoy.

Chapter Two

[image] [image]

Silverpaw trudged through the forest. Her paws squelched against the sopping wet ground, inky mud painting her silver paws brown. Her fur was slicked back and darkened by the rain. Lightning flashed through the air occasionally, and she flinched as thunder echoed behind it.

The scent the apprentices were tracking was putrid. It smelt of dirt and old crowfood, mingled underneath the unmistakable tang of cat and the faintest hint of twolegs. It grew ever more powerful as they traced it further into unmarked lands. Silverpaw shivered. What once was excitement was now dwindling as she began to second-guess their journey. In fact, the sense of wrongness Owlpaw had been so insistent about had finally settled upon her own shoulders. It felt as though the shadows themselves had grown eyes and were watching her, waiting for the perfect moment to pounce.

"Whoever these cats are, they smell awful," Owlpaw remarked lowly, stalking along a few tail-lengths behind her. "I wonder if they roll in their own filth?"

Silverpaw's chuckle broke the uncomfortable silence. "They probably do! They are rogues, after all."

Owlpaw smiled slightly, and the two lapsed back into silence. They continued padding along, the quiet between them only interrupted by periodic claps of thunder and the constant impact of rain. As Silverpaw cast occasional glances back at her brother, she realized that he was growing more relaxed with the passage of time. She sighed in relief. Upon seeing him calming down, the tension in her own shoulders began to slacken as well.

Suddenly, Owlpaw let out a soft hiss. "Silverpaw!"

Silverpaw whipped her head around, her hackles raised in alarm. "Owlpaw? What's the matter?" She quickly surveyed him. His paws

were fine, his pelt was fine, and his face was sprawled in a mischievous grin. Her concern fell into a glare. "Oh, you flea-pelt!" She yowled. She sprang at the tabby and tackled him to the ground.

The littermates crashed around on the sopping forest floor, playfully nipping and pawing at one another. At last, Owlpaw had Silverpaw pinned. She glared up at him and batted at his nose, rainwater dripping unpleasantly onto her face.

"You fish-brain," she growled. "Don't scare me like that!"

Owlpaw laughed and relinquished his hold, giving his fur a quick lick. "Oh, StarClan," he grumbled. "My fur's all muddy now!"

Silverpaw scrambled back to her paws, twisting her neck around to look at her own pelt, the silver of her fur almost entirely disappeared beneath a film of brown. She gave her shoulder a quick lick. It did nothing but give her a mouth full of muck.

"And whose fault is that?" She retorted, spitting out what she could.

"Yours, of course."

Silverpaw narrowed her eyes teasingly. "As if you didn't provoke me first!" She rasped her tongue across her muzzle, trying earnestly to rid her tastebuds of the earthy flavor.

"Oh, whatever," Owlpaw plopped down next to her, shouldering her heartily.

She shoved him back, grinning, and they remained huddled against each other as they caught their breath. Once they were ready, the two continued on the trail again. The longer they traveled, the more leaden Silverpaw's paws became, and the more frequently she yawned. She cast her eyes to the rainy sky. She couldn't even find the moon to determine how much time was left until dawn. She noticed that Owlpaw's steps were growing heavy, too.

"Maybe we should turn back soon," she commented at last, her lips curling into a frown.

Owlpaw tilted his head. "Are you sure?" He mewed. "We've already

come so far. Do you really want to give up now?"

Silverpaw paused to think. "Yeah, let's just stop here. You need to get up early for your fishing patrol, remember?"

"Right, thanks for remembering. But first," Owlpaw dropped to a crouch, his eyes glittering, "I'll race you to that boulder!"

Silverpaw followed the flick of his tail, excitement spurring in her chest. A good distance ahead of them, a large boulder was wedged between two trees, its damp surface painted a chalky brown from the rain.

"You're on!" She smirked, and without waiting for him to respond, she propelled forward.

Silverpaw's feet slammed against the ground with a loud splash. She raced through the puddle-strewn forest as fast as she could, her eyes locked onto the boulder. Mud flew with each impact, slopping over her belly and the trees she passed by.

It took only a few moments for Owlpaw to easily sweep past her. His speed outmatched any member of their Clan, and oftentimes, he was teased for 'having WindClan blood.' The statement was folly, of course, as he was simply good at everything. A twinge of jealousy flickered in Silverpaw's heart as her brother bested her once again.

In an instant, the powerful wind that blew at their backs swept around and reversed directions in a wild torrent, before swirling back in its initial direction. In that brief moment, an overwhelming stench filled Silverpaw's lungs.

Her steps faltered and her eyes darted to the forest. An eye there, a flick of a tail through some shrubbery, and elsewhere, a flash of teeth. The rogues were *watching* them.

"Owlpaw!" Silverpaw shouted, picking up speed again until her legs burned. "Owlpaw, get back here, *now!"*

The tabby tom shot a glance over his shoulder, a teasing smile dancing in his eyes. "You're not going to—" his voice cut off abruptly as he spotted something beyond his sister, and he

stumbled, his paws skittering in the earth as he came to a rapid halt.

Silverpaw immediately slammed into his side, her breathing coming in rapid gasps. She pressed tightly against his flank and spun around to study the surrounding trees. Their branches stretched forth like twisted bars, shrouding them from the sky and imprisoning the apprentices in the overwhelming, swirling stench of rogues.

Silverpaw's eyes darted along the treeline. Her stomach plummeted. Surrounding them was an unspeakable number of silhouettes, watching them through glistening eyes. Their teeth and claws shimmered in the rain.

"Who are you?" She shouted, unsheathing her claws and allowing her fur to bristle. Underneath the stench and dampness of the rain, the smell of anger choked the sky.

A brown tom slipped out from the undergrowth. His face was wickedly scarred; one half was completely naked of fur, and instead, it was marred with deep grooves of healed, pink tissue. The scar stretched all the way from his chin to his brow, and the eye beneath it was milky and white, split by narrow claw marks. The other eye, surrounded by thin brown fur, was a striking shade of blue.

"Greetings," the tom purred, his voice as smooth as silk. Though his tone was calm, it didn't quite touch on friendliness.

Silverpaw narrowed her eyes and jutted her chin. "I *said*, who are you?" She snarled. "Why did you trespass on our territory?" Boldness shone in her golden eyes, and it took every ounce of willpower to keep the slight tremble out of her voice.

The brown tom purred and swished his tail in a manner that was almost taunting. Then, the purr morphed into a deep, throaty laugh that rumbled from his chest. "Why should I inform a *Clan cat* of my motives? Of who I am?" He swept forward in easy strides. He stopped merely a whisker-length away from Silverpaw's face, his breath stinking of crowfood.

"Stay back!" She hissed. Without hesitation, the silver apprentice slashed out with unsheathed claws, leaving four bloody furrows across the rogue's muzzle.

The tom recoiled quickly, his lip drawn back in a snarl. Now a reasonable distance away, he swiped his tongue thoughtfully over his nose. "Oh, *no*, this can't do," he tsked, his snarl twisting into a grin so wide it sent a jolt of fright trickling down Silverpaw's spine.

He lifted his tail high into the air and brought it down in a swift lash. Still grinning, he converged into the trees where sudden battle cries erupted into the sky. Silverpaw shot a glance at Owlpaw, her expression dwindling into terror.

He looked equally as afraid.

A cat burst from the underbrush. Her face was twisted in a crooked smile, and she swiped her claws towards the apprentices. Silverpaw intercepted the rogue and caught her arm with hooked claws. The rogue hissed, yanking her arm free with the sound of softly tearing flesh, and she fled silently back to the trees.

Another cat flew out. Then another, and another. Eagerness to prove herself rapidly fell into a panic as Silverpaw tried her hardest to fend off the onslaught of rogues, but with each blow she landed, she earned two more. And it *hurt*. Her ears flattened against her skull as another cat scored its claws across her flank, and she whipped around to catch them, only to receive a painful tug on her tail. She cried out.

A ginger tom leaped out and snapped his teeth at the silver apprentice while she was distracted. She quickly backed up to dodge, but with a distressed shout, she stumbled over Owlpaw's feet, her paws twisting over each other. The two apprentices crashed to the ground, and Silverpaw heard raucous laughter from the woods. Her ears burned hot with embarrassment and fury.

"Sorry!" She muttered to Owlpaw, giving him a quick lick as they scrambled to their paws. The brown tabby didn't bother replying, his face sharpened into a scowl. He was already preoccupied with a new rogue.

The battle—if it could even be called that—dragged painfully on. Owlpaw was faring much better than Silverpaw, with only the occasional scratch bedecking his pelt. His sister, on the other paw, was battered with fresh wounds, her muscles trembling with exhaustion. To her horror, she found herself struggling to keep her weight on her right foot, realizing that each time she stepped on it, a throbbing heat grew progressively worse.

"We just have to hold out a little while longer," Owlpaw encouragingly tossed over his shoulder. "You're doing great." He deftly swatted at a she-cat who bore down upon his littermate.

Silverpaw grunted in acknowledgement. Soon, daybreak would come, and by then she hoped Dappledfang would have noticed his missing apprentice. *RiverClan won't abandon us!* She thought, gritting her teeth against another agonizing blow.

When Silverpaw finally felt as though she would collapse, the rogues slipped back into the trees. She braced for more attacks, but as more seconds passed, she realized that the onslaught was over.

Silverpaw heaved a gasp and tumbled down to the soaked earth. She shuddered as pain and relief flooded over her. The floor was sticky with blood and wet from the rain, and her thoughts were so unbearably fuzzy.

"Silverpaw, no!" Owlpaw hissed, nudging his weakened sister back to her paws. "They're still here. Please, hang in there a little longer."

Blearily, Silverpaw glanced around. To her dismay, her brother was correct. The rogues still watched them from the treeline, their murmurs whipped away in the howling storm. She leaned on her brother for support and let out a hoarse growl, sliding her claws back out of their sheathes. It was a miserable display.

Before she could fully stabilize her wobbling legs, claws melted into her shoulders. Silverpaw shrieked in pain and fury as she was dragged back to the ground, pulled away so quickly that her brother couldn't even react in time. Owlpaw yowled in alarm and lunged after her, but he couldn't reach her. A cat leaped onto his back and tackled him to the ground. Owlpaw let out a roar of fury,

flipping around and latching his claws around his attacker's neck, rolling around on the floor in a vicious tussle.

Silverpaw fought and squirmed against her captor, but she was already so weakened from the prior attacks that her struggles proved fruitless. The ginger tom pressed his claws against her skull, pushing her muzzle deep into the dirt. She winced and grew still. Particles tickled her nose with each gasping breath.

Owlpaw spat after the cat who'd attacked him as they fled back into the woods. More rogues flushed out, their attacks merciless, but he fought back just as ruthlessly. It was almost as if StarClan were fighting alongside him, offering him the strength of their warriors. Silverpaw, through a mist of pain, watched her brother in awe.

"Quit fighting back," a familiar voice hissed from the trees. The scarred brown tom crept back out of the forest, his head high and proud. "If you continue, we'll kill your silver friend.

Tears pricked at Silverpaw's eyes as the ginger tom sank his claws deeper into her skull. She could feel warm blood trickling from the fresh wound.

Owlpaw's eyes flashed towards her. Though he fought to reign in his emotions, Silverpaw could see the raw fear in his eyes.

"What's preventing you from killing her once I stop?" He snarled, darting as quickly as a snake at another cat who tried to sneak up on him. He hooked his claws beneath their chin, sending their head snapping back. The cat was stunned for a moment before running away.

"You have my word," the tom silkily purred. His eyes strayed after his comrade, then back to Owlpaw as the apprentice greeted a new rogue with bared teeth and claws. He continued, "and I never, *ever* break my word. Though such a thing may mean nothing to a Clan cat such as yourself, honesty is valued outside of your puny little world on the lake."

Owlpaw hesitated. His golden eyes flickered to Silverpaw, pinned beneath the ginger rogue and incapable of escaping. She urgently

shook her head.

Her heart plummeted and she let out a muffled cry as she realized that it was already too late. In Owlpaw's moment of distraction, the brown rogue had cocked his head. At this gesture, four cats leaped out of the woods, all from different angles, their faces twisted in malicious smiles.

Owlpaw snarled as claws dug into his fur. He scrambled to throw off his attackers, but to no avail. The rogues pushed him to the ground where he writhed, until at last, his golden eyes lost their fight and he grew limp, his nostrils flaring with each breath.

The victors exchanged purrs of triumph, only to be taken by surprise as Owlpaw surged upward in a sudden explosion of strength, a battle cry ripping from his lungs. He whirled around, swiping his claws at the nearest cat—a white speckled tom. The tom's green eyes widened in alarm as he tried, but failed, to skip out of reach.

Claws scored across the soft area of his throat. He parted his mouth in a soundless scream, blood bubbling at the corners of his mouth and oozing down his chin. Silverpaw flinched at the horrific sight.

Without even a moment's hesitation, Owlpaw whipped around and sprang on a tabby she-cat, bowling her over onto the floor. His claws tore mercilessly into her swollen stomach as she struggled to kick him off. A black tom shrieked in outrage, ripping his claws into Owlpaw's shoulders. Owlpaw leaped away, his tail lashing for balance as he swung around to deliver a savage blow to the tom's chest. The black tom skipped backwards, hissing viciously. His eyes darted to the trees where the wounded queen had fled, and with a shake of his fur, he followed in hot pursuit.

Owlpaw pinned back his ears and circled in place, his hackles raised and a feral snarl rolling from his chest.

As he was facing the other direction, the scarred brown tom lunged.

Silverpaw's scream shook the air, but Owlpaw's reaction was delayed. The brown rogue sank his claws into the apprentice's

figure, and with a yowl, the two went rolling to the ground. Owlpaw flipped onto his back and kicked his hind claws ferociously into the rogue's stomach. The tom twisted his stomach out of reach, powerfully planting his paws and effectively pinning the tabby apprentice.

Owlpaw's eyes flashed, and he fell still.

The rogue's face twisted into a wicked grin. He lowered his muzzle close to Owlpaw's, and the younger tom flinched at the stink. "The same trick won't work twice, Clan cat," he hissed. He turned his head and crowed to the forest, "This tom, a valuable asset to his wretched Clan, will now die at my claws. His life will pass as a message to those pitiful excuses of *warriors!"*

The rogue reared his head and lifted his claws high into the air. Jubilant cries echoed from the trees. Owlpaw stared up in horror, paralyzed from his complete and utter fear.

"No!" Silverpaw squirmed against her captor. She struggled to kick at the ginger tom's legs, but his paws were unyielding. Her panic seized around her heart like icy talons, and she fought even harder, pain lancing through her body with each desperate jerk.

"Please!" Silverpaw shrieked. "Don't kill him, kill me instead! I'm the one who wanted to find you! *Just let my brother live!"*

Her body wracked with sobs as her pleas were ignored. She was held too firmly. No matter how hard she struggled, how hard she fought, she couldn't even move a whisker-length in an attempt to save her brother.

Unable to avert her eyes, Silverpaw was forced to watch as the brown tom brought his claws in a downward swing.

Her grief pierced the sky as her brother's life was extinguished.

❀

Finally, updates have begun! Thank you all so much for being patient with me throughout all of my delays. Though the story is not yet finished, I feel like I've held it off for long enough

that it's finally time to for me to share it with you all (I'm hoping that actively posting it will keep away the impulse to rewrite it again, haha!). As I continue working on the story, I will aim for a once-per-week upload schedule.

While it certainly isn't perfect and still has its flaws, I'm really happy with how far this story has come, and I'm excited to share it with you guys. Be sure to keep your eyes open for updates every *Friday!*

If you enjoyed this chapter, please give it a vote, and if there's anywhere I can improve, please comment your feedback. I love constructive criticism!

Thank you for reading, and I'll see you again next week! ~ Kitten

❀

If you are reading this story on a site other than WattPad, you are at risk of a malware attack. If you wish to read this story safely and for free, please refer to my user profile, @kittennoodle, on the website of origin.

Chapter Three

[image]

Rain poured down from the sky in relentless sheets. The silhouettes of far-stretching branches lashed their arms against the lightning-streaked sky, leaves fluttering away in a violent gale.

Silverpaw stumbled numbly through the woods. Her face, her pelt, and her heart seared in pain. A fresh scar ripped across the flesh over her tightly shut eye, stretching all the way down to her jaw. It dripped a thick crimson, and the many other injuries battering her fur matched the scarlet ooze.

The night had dragged on agonizingly once Owlpaw had been murdered. Every will Silverpaw had to fight vanished alongside the light in his eyes, and she simply sat, as limp as fresh-kill as the rogues beat and battered her. The brown tom, the one whose claws were stained with Owlpaw's blood, took great pleasure in ripping his claws through her face, until at last he commanded his lackeys to let her run free. Of course, his underlings chased her back to RiverClan land. Where else would they send her?

Silverpaw could recognize the area around her, yet at the same time, she could not. Her suffering and the never-ending downpour of rain fogged her mind, and though the landmarks were familiar, she couldn't quite place where she was.

She tipped her head weakly to the sky. For the hundredth time, she asked StarClan the question that deafeningly raced through her mind: *Why? Why did you let Owlpaw die, and not me?*

Though her ancestors offered no answer, she still pushed on. Every step she took sent agony lancing through her bones, and she struggled to keep off her right paw while her scratches burned from the harsh assault of rain. Behind her, a crimson trail blazed her path through the forest. No matter how badly she simply wanted to stop and give up, she knew that Owlpaw would want her to keep pushing. If she weren't to survive the night, his fight to save her

would've been pointless. *At the very least, I need to warn the Clan.*

A sudden flash of lightning zigzagged through the sky, lighting up the forest in a blinding white. It was followed immediately by a deafening roar. In her blindness, Silverpaw stumbled over a root. Her body flipped, and with a loud splash, she completely submerged in a puddle of mud. Sopping dirt filled her nose, sweeping over her body and piercing her injuries. She flailed around, struggling to discover which way was up.

Her head broke the surface and she gasped in the wet air. She pulled in heavy breaths, her body trembling as she desperately tried to rise to her paws. Her legs completely gave way, and she collapsed with a sucking splash.

The puddle of mud wasn't terribly deep, and her paws touched the bottom as once again she tried to rise to her trembling paws. Her heart scampered with panic and fear, but she forced herself to try once more to escape.

Her paws scrabbled against the muddy levee, yet she couldn't find any solid footing on the slippery incline. Tears sprang from her eyes as she realized that she was stuck. The only noise to comfort her was the rush of rainwater slamming the earth, and hopelessly, she rested her muzzle against the muddy bank.

Her eyelids fluttered. Exhaustion weighed heavily upon her weakened body, and though she tried desperately to stay conscious, the pull of sleep overwhelmed her. The panic, fear, and desolation of that horrendous night plagued her thoughts as darkness crept in around her, dragging her away from reality.

"I smell blood!"

A voice broke through the air. Silverpaw stirred, her movements weighted by the heavy, sticky mud. The sludge oozed beneath her fur and deep into her injuries, which throbbed agonizingly. She groaned.

Grasping her claws around a string of willpower, she squeezed open her unwounded eye. The sky above her was still dark and stormy, giving her no hint to the passage of time. Rain drizzled against her eyelashes, and she flinched at the gentle impact. Then, a flash of red fur darted along the corners of her vision.

"Great StarClan, it's Silverpaw!"

Feet squelched against the ground as two cats approached the puddle of mud. One trod with caution, while the other scampered with urgency. The warriors leaped upon a gnarled root and peered down at the submerged apprentice. Through blurry eyes, Silverpaw recognized the red fur of her mentor, Sorrelmouse, and the gray fur of Stonefur.

Silverpaw tried to move, but her body was so weak that even the mild attempt made her tremble. She whimpered and squeezed her eyes shut. She felt so helpless, so useless. The exact opposite of what a RiverClan warrior should be. And on top of that, her brother was dead. *Dead.* The word echoed through her mind and shook her to the core.

Sorrelmouse stretched her neck down and touched her wet nose to Silverpaw's. The apprentice winced at the contact.

"How did you get yourself into this situation?" Sorrelmouse scolded softly, her voice sounding much like that of a worried mother.

Silverpaw couldn't bring herself to answer and instead squeezed her eyes tighter. She didn't want to hear about how foolish she was. Oh, StarClan, she already *knew* just how terrible of a decision she'd made.

Unaware of the war in the apprentice's thoughts, Sorrelmouse leaned carefully over the edge of the root and firmly grasped Silverpaw's scruff. Her claws dug gratingly into the bark as she fought to keep her grip.

The mud sucked at Silverpaw's body as the red warrior heaved. Stonefur quickly joined Sorrelmouse to help, sinking his claws gingerly into Silverpaw's fur and pulling.

The apprentice remained still as the two warriors hauled her out of the small pit. She was gently lugged to the ground, and she winced as pain lanced through her jostled injuries. Mud caked her pelt like a mossy tree, so dense that it felt like she was still completely submerged even once there was solid earth beneath her.

Sorrelmouse coiled around the silver apprentice and began briskly grooming her fur. Silverpaw's trembling gradually eased under the comforting rasps of her mentor's tongue, and she twisted her head to bury her muzzle in Sorrelmouse's red fur.

More pawsteps pounded against the muddy floor. Silverpaw cracked open an eye. Another pair of cats emerged from the underbrush.

"Have you found Owlpaw?" Sorrelmouse asked urgently, flipping her head around to stare at the newcomers.

A beautiful, long-furred ginger she-cat approached. "We have, but he's not in good condition. He was on the outskirts of our hunting grounds. He... wasn't alive." Heatfur's amber eyes flickered to the trembling Silverpaw, and she swallowed uncomfortably. "Dappledfang is bringing him back to camp."

Sorrelmouse closed her eyes wordlessly for a moment, before she turned and gave Silverpaw a soft lick between the ears. "To your paws, now," she mewed softly. "We need to get you seen by Wishfern."

Silverpaw looked over at Sorrelmouse with glazed golden eyes. The warrior leaned forward and touched her nose comfortingly. "It's going to be okay," she vowed.

Sorrelmouse stood up. Silverpaw weakly tried to follow, but her legs would not respond, merely sliding against the mud with an overwhelming ache. Her right paw completely gave out, and she collapsed. Sorrelmouse's brow knitted together.

"Let me carry her," Heatfur offered.

Sorrelmouse nodded. She, Stonefur, and the third cat, Wolfpounce, carefully picked up Silverpaw and hauled her onto Heatfur's rain-

slicked shoulders. The large warrior shifted slightly to ensure that Silverpaw wouldn't slip. Silverpaw dug her claws lightly into the she-cat's thick fur and buried her nose in her pelt. The fish-tainted scent of her Clan filled her lungs and showered her mindless thoughts with comfort.

Heatfur began to trek through the rainy terrain, the other three warriors padding closely and periodically checking on Silverpaw. Every step jolted through the silver tabby's bones, and she sank her claws deeper into the warrior's pelt with every throb of pain.

At last, the group arrived at camp. Silverpaw had periodically slipped in and out of consciousness during their journey, and her deepest wounds had reopened and bled profusely. Stonefur slipped through a tangle of bushes and into the well-hidden medicine den.

Heatfur lowered to the ground and rolled Silverpaw carefully from her shoulders, where the silver apprentice lay unwilling to move. Even the slightest twitch of her fur brought sheer agony. She closed her eyes.

Furious voices erupted in the air. Silverpaw blinked open an eye. From the nausea and migraine that swept over her, she realized that she had dozed off again. She groaned and heaved onto her stomach, tucking her paws sorely beneath her as she searched the clearing.

"...of course she did!" A voice snarled. Silverpaw's eyes traveled to the source, and she immediately recognized the pale tabby pelt of her mother, Lionpoppy. Relief rushed over her like the waves of a tumultuous river, and she tried, yet failed, to hobble to her feet. "You know just how excellent a fighter Owlpaw is. It's the only explanation!"

"Do you have bees in your brain? They both reek of rogues!" Silverpaw's eyes flashed to the other source. It was Wishfern, standing a few tail-lengths away from her and blocking the path of Lionpoppy. Her feathery white fur was bushed out in fury as a flash of lightning lit up the sky. "Move right this instant, Lionpoppy. I must take her to my den."

Lionpoppy shrieked, "How *dare* you try to heal a murderer!"

She lunged. Her claws flashed through the air, and she snatched them deep into Wishfern's light fur. Without a sign of remorse, she flung the medicine cat to the ground. Mud smeared against Wishfern's beautiful white pelt. Whirling around, Lionpoppy surged towards Silverpaw. The apprentice's heart scampered. Her muscles trembling, she barely managed to haul herself to her paws.

"M-Mother!" She cried out, her eyes as wide as twin moons. "What are you doing?"

"Don't you *dare* call me your mother!" Lionpoppy yowled. She raised her claws to the air, hooked and vicious. Droplets of rain slivered down to the tips, glittering in the scarce moonlight.

Her arm swung down. Silverpaw cried out as her chest seared with pain, and she scrambled backwards, fear shining in her eyes as she fell to the ground. She glanced down in horror. A large gash stretched from her shoulder and across her chest, missing her throat by merely a hair. As she looked up, Lionpoppy raised her claws again.

Silverpaw cowered as best as she could, her tail tucking close and her ears pinning back.

Before Silverpaw's mother could deliver the next blow, red fur flashed across her vision. Sorrelmouse tackled the tabby warrior to the ground. The two cats writhed around in a screeching mess of teeth and claws, pummeling one another like savage rogues. Lightning flashed and blood flew. Cats peered out of their dens, their eyes wide at the chaos amid their own Clan.

Pinestar burst into camp. His eyes sharpened as they alighted upon the vicious scene. "Stop this instant! What is the meaning of this?"

Sorrelmouse immediately released Lionpoppy, spitting at the pale tabby and batting her away as she lunged again. At last, Lionpoppy gave up on her efforts, her flanks heaving for breath. Both of them had bloody clumps of hair missing, and their eyes shared a murderous glint.

Pinestar's eyes flickered to Wishfern. The medicine cat had finally

heaved to her paws. She muttered her quiet thanks to Heatfur, who gently cleaned the scratch on her flank.

"Lionpoppy has gone insane!" Sorrelmouse yowled, her tail whipping furiously behind her. "She attacked Wishfern and tried to murder Silverpaw."

"Wishfern tried to help that sorry excuse of an apprentice! Silverpaw killed her brother in cold blood," Lionpoppy snapped in return. "She deserves *nothing* but the cruelest of punishment, and if that means dying by my own claws, then so be it."

"Silverpaw would never kill Owlpaw! She loved him dearly."

The two warriors stood only a whisker-length away from each other, their hackles raised and spines arched. It would only be an instant until they fought again.

"Lionpoppy!" Pinestar bellowed. "Come with me to my den, *now."*

"But—"

"No buts," the leader snarled. He lashed his white-tipped tail and swept towards a large, gnarling willow tree. Its fronds waved furiously in the howling storm.

Lionpoppy's tail drooped, but she reluctantly followed her leader away. She shot a glance over her shoulder, her eyes narrowed into a furious glare at Silverpaw. The apprentice shivered.

"Come with me," Wishfern gently murmured, nudging Silverpaw to her feet.

Silverpaw stumbled with a grimace, ripping her eyes away from her mother's retreating figure. Tenderly lifting her paw, she leaned against the medicine cat's shoulder. Wishfern guided her through a cluster of bushes and into the medicine den. The blood that leaked from Silverpaw's injuries stained her muddied fur red.

"Lick your wounds clean," Wishfern instructed, guiding the apprentice into a nest.

Silverpaw obeyed quietly. She rasped her bristled tongue across the injuries she could reach until Wishfern hurried back over. In her paws was a sticky pulp and a swathe of cobwebs. The medicine cat rubbed the substance into Silverpaw's injuries. She winced at the sting, but didn't move any further than that.

Once Wishfern finished applying the medicine, she wrapped the injuries in cobwebs. Where Silverpaw's injuries bled the most, she pressed her paws firmly against them to ease the bleeding to a lighter flow.

Wishfern removed her paws and sniffed at the apprentice's fur until she was satisfied. Afterwards, she dipped into the corner of the den where she fetched a pawful of seeds and leaves. "Eat these," she instructed, passing the small bundle of items to Silverpaw.

Obediently, Silverpaw lapped up the seeds and munched on the leaves. Her face screwed up at the bitter flavor that caught in her throat. She felt a sway of dizziness and drew her paws beneath her.

"The poppyseeds and thyme will help you sleep and ease your shock," Wishfern's voice sounded distant as she spoke, turning her nose to inspect Silverpaw's paw. "I'll check your wounds again in the morning."

Silverpaw blinked slowly in response, curling in on herself. Subconsciously, she drew her paw away, hardly registering Wishfern's disappointed *tsk*. She tucked her nose under her tail and squeezed her eyes shut, sniffling as Owlpaw's face flashed through her memory. Her brother. A cat she could never part with since the day she was born. A cat she would never see again, all because of her faulty decision to leave camp in the middle of the night.

If I never made Owlpaw leave camp with me, he would still be alive, she realized sadly. *Lionpoppy is right. I* am *a murderer.*

Agony surged around her like a wall of needles, but its origin was not from her wounds. It surfaced from her memories. Owlpaw's terrified golden eyes flashing, his soundless yowl, and finally, his last breath hitched in a sputtering mouthful of blood.

With the horrors of the night tainting her mind, Silverpaw at last succumbed to her exhaustion.

Chapter Four

[image]

Silverpaw raced ahead of the patrol with her tail swinging high above her head. Her paws ached and their pads were cracked with sores from her first ventures into the woods, but the excitement of finishing her first day of training numbed her to the pain.

"Slow down!" Her mentor laughed, chasing gleefully after her. "You can't just run off like that."

Silverpaw, seeing that Owlpaw had already beat her to the crossing stones, pouted silently and slowed to a lope. They and their mentors had caught up with each other near the Training Pool to return to camp together, but Owlpaw had taken off at a run the moment the barrier came within sight.

"Well, how come he *gets to run around?" She complained.*

Sorrelmouse trotted up next to her, tossing a playful glare back at Dappledfang, her mate and Owlpaw's mentor, who padded on behind them. He shrugged amicably. She gave an exaggerated roll of her eyes and turned back to Silverpaw with a friendly smile. "I can smell the blood on your *paws, not his. You need to get that treated before galavanting around the forest."*

Silverpaw halted, lifting a paw and giving the bottom a deliberate lick, wrinkling her nose at the taste of dust, grime, and blood.

"All clean now," she said without falter, picking up her pace again. "I'll get it treated later!"

"Silverpaw, stop right now, or you'll be confined to camp for the next moon!" Sorrelmouse shouted, but Silverpaw ignored her, instead racing ahead with excitement fueling each step.

She leaped onto the crossing stones and bounded from rock to rock, moving as if she'd been doing it her entire life. The water that streamed

like a snake between the stones welcomed her with a joyous burble, and she grinned, landing on solid ground. Not breaking her stride, she pushed through the reed-woven barrier, emerging into the camp.

Owlpaw was already digging through the fresh-kill pile, and he looked up as she entered, a trout dangling from his mouth. The fish was large enough for the two of them to share.

Silverpaw cheerfully joined him, and the two strolled to the edge of the camp to settle down and eat their fill of prey. They chattered about the day with delight, comparing their experiences of exploring the territory for the first time. Owlpaw had seen a large bass swimming in one of the rivers. "It was this *big," he mewed, lifting his forepaws and stretching them wide for emphasis.*

Silverpaw cackled. "You're lying!" She smacked his paws out of the air.

"No, I'm not," Owlpaw insisted, puffing out his fur. "It could've eaten me whole!"

Silverpaw rolled her eyes. "Okay, fine. Well, I *saw a tail over the ShadowClan border." She leaned close to him in a stage whisper, "They were spying on us, I'm sure."*

Owlpaw huffed disbelievingly. "Now that's *a tall tale."*

Silverpaw adamantly shook her head. "Sorrelmouse stopped me from chasing after them." She blinked as she recalled the red warrior's claims; "Don't antagonize the other Clans. War isn't full of battle and glory as you've been told, but rather, of devastation and grief. Peace is the ultimate goal, not victory."

Owlpaw scoffed. "That's silly. We're warriors, *not kittypets."*

Silverpaw nodded in earnest agreement, ripping out another chunk of scaly flesh. She just couldn't wait *for her first battle!*

Later in the evening, Silverpaw found herself nestled in the crook of Lionpoppy's stomach, Owlpaw curled up beside her, the both of them basking up their mother's warmth. The pale warrior gave Silverpaw and Owlpaw a lick behind the ear each, a motherly purr thrumming in her chest.

"You two are the dearest things in the world to me," she murmured. "Your father would be so proud."

Silverpaw's eyes, as wide as twin golden moons, gazed up at her. "You think so?"

"I know *so," Lionpoppy reaffirmed. "He would be just as proud as I am."*

Owlpaw snuggled closer, his eyes squeezing comfortably shut. He blinked them open again, full of unabashed curiosity. "What was he like?"

The pale warrior swallowed, her eyes growing foggy and distant. "He was as handsome as you," she nuzzled Owlpaw's tabby striped cheek, "and his fur was as silver as your sister's. And his eyes..." she sighed softly. "You both have his eyes."

Silverpaw smiled. "I hope I can meet him someday."

"One day you will. Once you've lived your lives to the fullest, you'll join him among the stars."

The sun, close to the horizon, glared off their pelts in blinding hues of orange. Silverpaw yawned sleepily. Her first training session had been an extensive, tiresome one, but as long as she had her family there for her after a tedious day, she would never let anything bring her down.

❀

The sun glistened against the morning dew, reflecting brightly across the leaf-scattered earth. It was barely past sunrise, emphasized by the sound of birds singing happily for the new day. Cats roamed the RiverClan camp as if it were any other morning. Some ate contentedly, others socialized, and the rest were returning from their early dawn patrols, their mouths full of plump fish.

Behind the thicket that made up the medicine den, Silverpaw dozed quietly. Little droplets of dew tipped her fur from the misty morning, and her body was swathed in patches of cobwebs, hiding her healing scars from the world. The nest she resided in was soft with little reeds and featherdown knitted inside to ensure her comfort.

Since the rogue attack, the silver apprentice had been stuck under Wishfern's vigilant care, fighting to heal dastardly infections. It had been a difficult battle to regain her health—one that many assumed she would not survive—but alas, she prevailed. Her swollen, angry wounds grew softer and developed scabs, and gradually, she was beginning to regain her physical strength. Mentally was a much different story, as her eyes forever remained haunted from the indefinite plague of her brother's death.

Silverpaw stirred in her sleep. The cat at the foot of her nest stood swiftly to his paws. His green eyes forlornly studied the silver she-cat, before he slipped away and left the den.

Moments later, Silverpaw's golden eyes fluttered open. The area around her right eye was scarred, and miraculously, the eye itself was unharmed. The cobwebs that bedecked it were gone now, removed after only a quarter-moon of being under Wishfern's care. It was among the only wounds to not grow infected and overall had healed well, aside from the permanent lack of fur.

Movement in the corner of the den caught Silverpaw's attention. Wishfern was busy checking and reorganizing her herbs, a routine she religiously followed every few days. The silver apprentice's mouth stretched wide in a yawn. Wishfern's amber eyes darted over, and in an immediate response, she grabbed a mouthful of roots, leaves, and cobwebs. She passed over a small sliver of running water, stopping at Silverpaw's side.

She placed the bundle on the floor and nosed the cobwebs decorating Silverpaw's fur. She peeled back the bandage along the silver apprentice's flank to inspect the wound.

"How are you feeling today?" She inquired as she slowly circled around the apprentice, gradually undressing the injuries.

Silverpaw flinched at the tug against her hairs. "I'm fine, I guess," she mumbled.

Wishfern hummed in response, though the slight frown she bore expressed that she was unconvinced. She lifted a paw and prodded the injury that stretched from Silverpaw's shoulder and across her

chest. Silverpaw sank her claws deep into the earth, squeezing her eyes shut at the pain. She wasn't entirely sure if it was from the memory of her mother's claws, or the injury itself.

"Toadpaw is worried about you," Wishfern commented as she circled around the apprentice, nosing and poking at her healing scars. The injuries were tender, but not nearly as bad as they had been.

"Did he visit again?" Silverpaw asked through gritted teeth.

"Yes. He visits every night."

"What did he say this time?"

"Nothing. He simply sat by your side until you woke."

Silverpaw nodded in quiet acceptance.

"Now, I need you to sit still. A few of your injuries still need to be treated." Wishfern flicked up a paw and gently pressed it against one of the sores along Silverpaw's flank.

Silverpaw grimaced. "Aren't they healing?"

"Now that the infection is gone, they're healing rather well," Wishfern mewed absently. "In fact, you should be able to return to training tomorrow, so long as you don't do anything too strenuous."

"Tomorrow?" Silverpaw jolted.

"Mhm." Wishfern began to wrap a new cobweb onto Silverpaw's flank.

The apprentice froze. "I don't think I'm ready, Wishfern," she whispered, curling her tail tightly over her paws. "I don't think I ever will be. Not without Owlpaw."

The medicine cat carefully wound a swathe of cobwebs against the injury on Silverpaw's chest, her touch as tender as her tone. "You'll be fine. I'll speak to Sorrelmouse this evening. She'll take care of you, as she always has." She pulled back with a whisk of her

feathery tail, smiling lightly at the young she-cat. "Now, I'd suggest you get some sunlight and fetch something to eat. You have a big day coming up."

Silverpaw licked her lips nervously. "All right. Thank you."

"No need to thank me," Wishfern called over her shoulder. It's my job, after all."

Silverpaw watched the white-furred she-cat as she fetched a small parcel of leaves from the far corner of the den. She returned with a slight glance to the apprentice, then, she slipped outside without another comment.

Silverpaw sank deeper into her nest. The thought of eating was unappetizing. It churned in her belly and rose through her chest like bile, prompting her to spit it back out. She took a deep, shaky breath. *She'll know if I don't eat,* she told herself sternly. *She always does.*

Standing reluctantly to her paws, Silverpaw gave her pelt a haphazard grooming, carefully avoiding the stretches of cobwebs. Once finished, she crept out of the den.

The camp was unnervingly normal. Sunlight shone brightly down at her, causing her to squint, while the leaflitter exhibited a vast array of color. Reds, oranges, yellows, and browns matched the vibrant canopy above. A cool breeze rustled through her fur, sending a new shower of leaves fluttering delicately to the earth.

A few cats milled about the clearing. She could see Ravenfire and Mistpaw sharing tongues near the fallen log of the elder's den, while Sandytail struggled to find himself a small sunfish from the fresh-kill pile. Lionpoppy was entering the log with a bundle of bile-filled moss dangling from her jaws. Just outside the nursery, Quietoak lingered in a perfect ray of sunshine, her eyes warm with affection as she watched Pigeonkit and Finchkit frolic around. On the opposite side of camp, next to Pinestar, Salmonskip spectated his kits through slitted eyes, though his gaze never once roamed towards his ex-mate.

Her spine prickling, Silverpaw padded slowly towards the fresh-kill pile. Before her lay a small heap of fish alongside even fewer mice and voles. Even a thrush decorated the pile; a feathered rarity in the fish-eating Clan.

She halfheartedly nosed through the contents of the pile until she found a young, scrawny vole. It was nearly entirely made of skin and bones, and would offer very little to eat. *Perfect.* Satisfied by her find, Silverpaw plucked it from the pile and began making her way back to the confines of the medicine den.

"Silverpaw!"

The silver apprentice blinked. Her ears flicked around as she attempted to pinpoint the voice, but before she could properly react, a slim body slammed into her. Silverpaw yowled in surprise, her vole flying to the ground as she was sent rolling in a tumble of black and silver fur. A hiss rattled from deep within her chest as her shoulder jarred, and instinctively, her claws slipped out of their sheathes. Terror roared like a fire in her blood.

"*Mistpaw!"* Silverpaw snapped, pushing the black apprentice off of her.

She rolled to her paws and gave her pelt a brisk shake, twisting her neck around to give her injury a ginger sniff. Underneath the bandages, the wound hadn't broken, but it throbbed with tender heat. Her eyes darted up, the panic in her bristled shoulders smoothing over to annoyance.

Mistpaw's green eyes grew round. "I'm sorry," she mewed quickly, gently pressing her head to Silverpaw's chin. Silverpaw pulled away, her hackles raised at her friend's apologetic purr, "I forgot that you're still injured. You're looking great." Her eyes darted to the side of Silverpaw's face, her expression sobering for a brief moment, before her bright smile returned.

Silverpaw shifted her shoulders with a snort. "Regardless of how *'great'* I look, that still hurt pretty badly," she admonished, twitching her tail unhappily. "What are you doing, anyways? I thought you were spending time with Ravenfire." She angled her ears to the

black elder, who was watching the reunion through observant amber eyes.

"I wanted to see how you were doing," Mistpaw explained easily. "It's been too long since you and Owlpaw trained with us. Toadpaw and Lichenpaw can be frustrating when you guys aren't around." Her eyes gleamed, but she faltered as Silverpaw audibly winced.

"Don't you remember?" Silverpaw hissed scathingly. "Owlpaw is *dead."* She ripped her eyes away from her friend. She gritted her teeth, her brother's terrified eyes flashing through her mind once again. "He won't be training with you again. Not now, not ever."

"StarClan..." Mistpaw breathed. "Silverpaw, I'm so sorry. I just forget sometimes, you know? It's... it's so hard to really believe that he's gone. Sometimes, it even feels like he's still here." She shrugged helplessly. "There's never been a day where he hasn't been, up until now."

Silverpaw flattened her ears against her skull and turned away. Mistpaw's words struck too close to her heart; every morning she woke up and looked around for him. She was so used to his warm presence being a constant, and now that he was gone, it felt like there was a cavernous hole gaping in her chest.

And it's all my fault.

"I'm sorry," Mistpaw echoed, lowering her tail.

Silverpaw breathed deeply. She squeezed her eyes tightly shut and blinked them back open, steely and emotionless. A mask that hid the true turmoil of her heart. "I'm going to rest now."

Giving her pelt a vigorous shake, she brushed past Mistpaw, her eyes set unwaveringly on the medicine den. Paws scrambled across the ground behind her, and it took only a moment for Mistpaw to be by her side again.

"Wait, Silverpaw, please," Mistpaw begged. "I can help you if you just let me!"

Silverpaw whirled around, baring her teeth in a snarl. "Leave me

alone, okay? Can't you see that I don't need your help? You're only making things worse!" She shouted.

Mistpaw froze, her mouth bobbing like a fish out of water. She snapped out of it in an instant, lashing her tail quickly. "You're not the only one who's grieving, you know! Though I'm not kin, Owlpaw was still a dear friend to me. It hurts just as much to see his empty nest every morning." She lowered her chin, her bristled fur lowering. "But... I understand, Silverpaw. I'm here if you need me." She stepped back, murmuring softly, "Please, forgive me."

And with that, the black she-cat whisked away, leaving Silverpaw to her lonesome.

She watched after her friend's rapidly retreating figure and shook out of her shock. "As if you could understand what I'm going through," she scoffed.

Turning tail, Silverpaw fled to the medicine den, pushing abruptly through the thicket while struggling to hold back her tears. She collapsed into her nest and let the dam break. Tears flooded down her face while regret and sorrow gnawed at her heart, twisting like a sharp thorn the deeper it went.

As she curled up deeper in the moss, she began to regret her callous words towards Mistpaw. *Maybe some company wouldn't be so bad...* she realized. Sniffling softly, she pushed those thoughts to the back of her mind, only to realize that she'd left her vole outside. She closed her eyes. She didn't have the heart to fetch it; it wasn't like she had an appetite, anyways.

With an empty belly and heart, she drifted into a fitful sleep, her dreams haunted by Owlpaw's death and the scarred tom's savage grin.

Chapter Five

[image]

Cold claws crept into Silverpaw's pelt, sinking past her skin and deep into her bones. A shiver broke from her ears to tail tip, and as she woke, she fluffed out her fur to negate the chilly morning.

Her golden eyes flashed around. Dawn light trickled in from the den entrance, bringing with it the crisp smell of cool air. Her eyes were crusted with dry tears, and she quickly licked a paw and drew it across her face to hide the evidence of her nightmares. Then, she twisted her neck around and gave herself a scrupulous grooming, applying more effort into her appearance than she had in moons.

Once her fur was nicely groomed, Silverpaw glanced around to see that Wishfern was still fast asleep. A spark of surprise ignited in her chest, as typically, the medicine cat was awake well before dawn. She tested the air, noticing the light smell of the lake mingled with the soft herbalescent scents of WindClan, ThunderClan, and ShadowClan's medicine cats.

It must've been the Half-Moon Gathering last night, Silverpaw realized. Nausea gathered in her stomach at the thought of Wishfern roaming the lake on her own. *How can she possibly feel safe while knowing of the dangers that lurk?*

She closed her eyes and breathed deeply in an attempt to calm her racing mind. She was certain that the rogues would strike again, as she had shared with Pinestar, Salmonskip, and Wishfern. But when and where, she was just as clueless as anyone else.

The next victim could've been Wishfern while the kind she-cat had been visiting with the other medicine cats. *But it wasn't,* she recognized, digging her claws into the moss of her nest.

The loud gurgle of her stomach interrupted her thoughts. Silverpaw flattened her ears with a grimace, and reluctantly, she dragged herself to her paws and padded out of the den. It was

barely dawn, purple-tinged light flitting across the dark morning sky. The frosty floor prickled bitterly at her paws, reminiscing over the forgotten cold night.

All that remained in the fresh-kill pile were leftovers from the previous evening. The pre-dawn patrol had yet to return, but it would only be a matter of time until the pile was overflowing with fresh, delicious prey. That was one thing Silverpaw would always be grateful for; the fact that RiverClan had a never-ending supply of fish in their rivers.

Silverpaw nosed through the meager contents and fetched three small minnows. She dragged them from the pile and devoured the morsels in a few swift bites. Once finished, she drew her tongue briskly across her muzzle to clear away any remains. She paused, her bristled tongue lingering momentarily on her right cheek, naked of fur. She didn't even know what the scars looked like, and merely the thought of how different she must look was frightening.

The reed-woven entrance to the camp shivered. Three cats strolled through. Crowspots, with her tired-looking apprentice, Toadpaw, and then Aspentail. They carried a few plump fish each, paws covered in mud and water glistening across their pelts in the early morning light.

Crowspots was the first to deposit her catch, a water vole and a fat catfish. Silverpaw watched for a heartbeat. She approached and gingerly snagged the catfish by its gaping mouth, backing away and silently meeting the inquisitive warrior's eyes. She didn't linger any longer than she needed to as she turned around and began her swift retreat to the medicine den. She could feel Toadpaw's eyes burning into the back of her neck.

She poked through the ferns. Wishfern was finally awake, later than usual, but not too much so. Silverpaw could tell that the white she-cat was tired, from her sagging eyelids to the heaviness in her typically fluid movements.

"Good morning," the medicine cat acknowledged, her expression brightening at the large fish dragging from Silverpaw's mouth.

Silverpaw placed the fish on the floor. She nudged it in Wishfern's direction. "Good morning, I thought you might want something to eat."

Wishfern gratefully dragged the catfish closer and took a bite out of it. She barely made a mark in the fish's thick flesh. "Thank you," she purred. "Come on over, you're welcome to have a bite. I can't finish this whole thing on my own."

"No thank you," Silverpaw mumbled, flattening her ears. "I already ate some minnows."

"Minnows are hardly filling," Wishfern scolded, her voice picking up a stern edge. "And I *know* you didn't eat yesterday. Come on now, have your share."

Silverpaw stared for a heartbeat longer, but the quiet rage slowly filling the she-cat's amber eyes finally won her over. She crept closer. Leaning down, Silverpaw took a tender bite out of the catfish. Her stomach swelled in rebellious gratitude as she swallowed the moist, sweet-tasting meat.

"Not so bad, is it?" Wishfern mewed calmly, eyeing the apprentice out of the corner of her eye as she took yet another bite.

Silverpaw grunted in acknowledgement, not quite offering an affirmation. She finished her fill rather quickly, her fullness leaving her belly round and content. While she wouldn't admit it, she was grateful Wishfern had made her eat.

"Right," Wishfern shook out her pelt and gave Silverpaw a rudimentary sniff once she was finished. She pulled back the cobwebs that stretched across the apprentice's shoulder and frowned, discarding the old bandages to the side. "It looks sore," she acknowledged thoughtfully, "but you still should be fine to go without the cobwebs. Just make sure to keep the injury clean, and again, don't do anything strenuous. Once you're done with your training, come see me."

"Yes, Wishfern."

Wishfern bared her teeth in a grin. "Well, off you go, now!" She purred. "I'm sure Sorrelmouse is itching to catch you up."

Silverpaw stiffened. "*Now?* As in, right now?"

"Of course right now." Wishfern gave Silverpaw an encouraging nudge. "You won't be sleeping in here anymore, either, so make sure to fix up your old nest."

"But... I don't think I'm ready."

"You'll never be ready if you keep using my presence as a crutch," Wishfern stated firmly. "Now, go! I'd like to sort my herbs without you in my fur." She gave Silverpaw a rougher nudge.

Silverpaw stumbled slightly, her mouth bobbing as she fought for more words. Unable to find a good argument, she relented. "Okay. Thank you, Wishfern."

Wishfern flicked her tail. "No thanks needed."

Casting one final glance at the medicine cat, Silverpaw hurried out of the den and into the clearing, her heart twisting with anxiety. Cats milled about, gathering in a haphazard cluster around Salmonskip as he arranged patrols. Pigeonkit and Finchkit watched the small commotion with curious eyes, but were quickly collected by their tired-looking mother.

Salmonskip was just about finished organizing the last few patrols. "Minnowstripe and Nightpatch, take your apprentices to the Horseplace border. Sorrelmouse; you, Honeywhisker, and Paledusk will go fishing downriver." His muzzle crinkled thoughtfully as his eyes flitted about the clearing. His expression lifted as he spotted Silverpaw lingering on the outskirts. "Oh, and take Silverpaw with you."

Silverpaw shrank beneath her pelt as cats turned their attention to her. Sorrelmouse's golden eyes widened gleefully.

"Get your tail over here!" The red warrior exclaimed.

Silverpaw swallowed the bile in her throat and scurried across

the clearing, keeping her belly brushed against the earth to avoid the curious eyes of her Clanmates. She knew the many rumors that circulated the camp from the rogue incident. From pity to scrutiny, now that she was finally returning to normalcy, she would face the brunt of it.

Sorrelmouse warmly touched her nose to the tip of Silverpaw's ear, startling the apprentice from her thoughts. "Is everything all right?"

Silverpaw shuffled her paws. "Y-Yeah."

Sorrelmouse studied her quietly. Her face morphed into a bright, reassuring smile, and she turned to face her fellow warriors. "In that case, let's get moving."

Silverpaw reluctantly followed her mentor onto the crossing stones, struggling to keep her face placid. Her tail lashed back and forth while her feet tightly gripped the slick rocks. She numbly leaped to the next one. She could hardly wrap her head around the fact that the last time she left camp had been with Owlpaw. On the night of his death. As she leaped to the other side of the river, her tail dragged against the pebbled shore.

She shot a glance back at Honeywhisker, who elegantly bounded across. She could nearly picture her brother in his place, his golden eyes alight in concentration.

"What're you staring at?" Honeywhisker sneered once he finished crossing. "Do I have a tick on my nose?"

"N-No, sorry." Silverpaw tore her eyes away to stare at the ground.

Honeywhisker chuckled, turning to Paledusk as the tom finished crossing. "Maybe I should take her rogue hunting sometime," he purred, loudly enough for Silverpaw to hear as the patrol continued walking. "Teach those *trespassers* a lesson."

"Honeywhisker..." Paledusk muttered quietly.

Silverpaw's claws twitched against the earth. It took every ounce

of willpower she had to resist spinning around and clawing the golden tom's ears off. She knitted her eyes shut and breathed sharply through her nose. *He's always been a fox-heart. He's just trying to rile you up,* she told herself.

Sorrelmouse's ears flicked intently, and she cast a soft gaze back at Silverpaw's begrudging figure. Her tail rested gently on the apprentice's shoulder. Silverpaw smiled weakly in return.

The cats continued on, trailing the river further downstream. They reached one of the wider points where the smell of RiverClan was faint. No patrol had hunted in that area for many weeks now, which meant that fish would be flourishing. Silverpaw's eyes followed the gentle current. The river took a bend around a corner, and beyond that, she could see the faint shimmering of the lake through the distant treeline.

Sorrelmouse pulled to a stop. "Let's fish here," she declared.

Honeywhisker nodded. "Why doesn't Silverpaw hunt a little closer to the lake?" He suggested, baring his teeth. "She'll scare away the good fish up here with all that blood on her claws."

Sorrelmouse's eyes sharpened before Silverpaw could utter a response. "Enough, Honeywhisker."

The golden tom scoffed. "You're kidding me, right? Everybody knows it was Silverpaw who killed Owlpaw." His eyes darted to the apprentice. "You've *always* been jealous of him."

Silverpaw's heart plummeted. "I—"

"I said, that's *enough!"* Sorrelmouse interrupted. She gave the tom a rough shove, and he whipped his head around with a furious snarl as his claws skidded against the pebbled shore. She swatted him over the ears, her claws budded slightly out of their sheathes. He recoiled, shock drawn across his face.

"Her brother is dead, and you have the audacity to accuse her of *killing him?* Are you insane?" Sorrelmouse leaned forward, spitting in his face. "You're behaving like a kit, and you'd best find yourself

some manners before I send you to treat the elders for ticks like you are one."

Honeywhisker stared at the warrior in astonishment. Wiping the expression off his face, he drew himself up to stand as tall as he could. Though he was significantly younger than Sorrelmouse, he still stood a few hairs taller than her.

"I'm not an apprentice anymore," he growled acidicly. "You can't treat me like one."

Sorrelmouse laughed a terrifying laugh, and the tom's face fell as he realized his mistake. She marched forward, menace swirling like a cloud above her as the warrior's boldness melted beneath her fury.

"I've been in this Clan for more seasons than you could ever imagine," Sorrelmouse's voice was low in warning, and with each step forward, Honeywhisker took a staggering pace back. "Pinestar respects me and my decisions, and he would *absolutely* warrant reducing you to the likes of an apprentice should you continue behaving like a kit fresh out of the nursery."

Honeywhisker's hind paws dipped into the river, and he flinched, ceasing all movements except for the rise and fall of his chest. Sorrelmouse bared her teeth, gauging a reaction from him. Tacitly, Honeywhisker turned his eyes away, though a soft hiss spurred from his mouth.

He dared not spit another word.

With a derogatory snort, Sorrelmouse spun back around and returned to Silverpaw's side. The apprentice was silent, her thoughts a whirlwind of emotion.

After he'd collected his bearing, Honeywhisker wordlessly waded into the river where Paledusk was already fishing. Their sleek, otter-smooth pelts dipped above and below the surface in a mesmerizing rhythm, searching for the next piece of prey.

Silverpaw remained silently beside Sorrelmouse, who'd sat down

beside her with her tail curled over her paws. The red warrior cast a soft stare to the silver apprentice, and gently, she rasped her tongue across Silverpaw's cheek. Silverpaw started.

"Are you okay?" Sorrelmouse mewed gently.

Silverpaw flattened her ears and turned away. "I'm fine."

Sorrelmouse sighed, lifting her tail to gently drape it across Silverpaw's shoulders. "You know you can't lie to me," the red cat remarked. "I realize that it must be a struggle to continue your training without Owlpaw by your side, but it will get easier with time. I promise."

Silverpaw wrinkled her nose. "You don't know what you're talking about," she scoffed.

A light spray of water showered the two cats as Honeywhisker erupted from the river, a flash of silvery scales glittering above his arms. He swiped a paw and snatched the fish out of the air, yanking it to his mouth where he snapped his teeth around it.

Grace flourished in the lithe kick of his paws as the golden tom eased ashore. He placed his catch, a large herring, on the riverbank. He turned around and quickly resubmerged.

Quietly studying the young warrior, Sorrelmouse managed to find words. "I understand more than you realize," she murmured, her voice rough with sadness.

Silverpaw cast a glance to the beautiful red warrior. Unshed tears glittered in Sorrelmouse's eyes as she traced Honeywhisker's movements, the golden tom moving like he was one with the water.

"What do you mean?" Silverpaw asked.

A wry smile twisted Sorrelmouse's face, and she lifted her eyes to the sky. "The life of a warrior brings many losses," she explained quietly. "Remember the flood last leaf-bare?"

Silverpaw blinked. All she could recall was muddy water slopping over her belly fur, teeth tight in her scruff, the

overwhelming stench of fear, and a piercing wail for help at the touch of damp grass. She blinked again, and the memory was gone. Alas, she was hardly more than a couple of moons old at the time. She couldn't expect to remember much.

"Not really," she mumbled. "I was too young to remember anything, but I think I remember fleeing the camp."

Sorrelmouse smiled. "You were just a kit," she conceded. "Many warriors succumbed to those floods. I knew plenty of them. I lost some of my dearest friends, my kin, and my last surviving daughter. It was a devastating period for all the Clans, especially for us, knowing that the waters we tread so well could turn against us so... so *violently."*

Silverpaw shuddered at the thought. Though she had little recollection of the disaster, she was suddenly struck by the true extent of the tragedy. She knew that Toadpaw, Mistpaw, and Lichenpaw had lost their parents. Honeywhisker's whole family had perished, and even her own father, Beechfeather, had been claimed in the floods. *But that wasn't all.* From what Sorrelmouse was telling her, countless more lives were lost.

"Your last surviving daughter?" Silverpaw realized.

Sorrelmouse nodded. Her eyes quietly slid shut. "My kits died to greencough shortly after they were born," she explained roughly. "Evefrost was the only one of her litter to survive, but she was still weak from the sickness. Her apprenticeship was delayed for two moons, but she still pushed and made it to warriorhood. I was so, so proud, but... like many others, she was lost in the floodwaters." Sorrelmouse opened her eyes, their golden surface glistening underneath a sheen of tears.

"Dappledfang and I spent many moons searching for her, but her body was one of the many we could never recover."

Silverpaw shrank beneath her pelt. "I'm sorry," she mewed softly. "Owlpaw..." she choked on her words. "Owlpaw's death made me think that nothing worse in the world could happen. I forgot that other cats have been through things, too." Her mind struggled to

comprehend what she was saying, but she continued on, "I'm sorry for... being so selfish," *I guess.*

Sorrelmouse gave Silverpaw a friendly nudge, the sadness piercing her golden gaze shedding into love. "Don't apologize," she firmly stated. "That wasn't the reason I shared this with you."

Silverpaw blinked up at her in surprise, her brow furrowed in confusion.

"It's okay to grieve," Sorrelmouse continued on, "but as you acknowledged, you need to remember that *everybody* suffers loss. It's inescapable. Even so, all of our loved ones are watching from Silverpelt, rooting us on and waiting for us to join them. But while your breath is still flowing through your body, you mustn't let your grief hold you back. Grow as a warrior, become the best cat you can be. Owlpaw wouldn't want his death to overcome you."

How can I not linger over his death, when I'm the one who killed him? The apprentice wondered, her heart twisting in her chest. She swallowed her thoughts and turned her eyes to Sorrelmouse. "Thank you," she said instead.

Sorrelmouse beamed. She gave Silverpaw a cheerful butt on the shoulder. "Of course. Now, let's do what we came here for, shall we?"

Silverpaw forced a smile, pushing her grief deep into her heart.

Twitching her whiskers, Sorrelmouse rose to her feet and padded to the water's edge. Silverpaw followed quietly beside her, a thrill shooting her veins as she dipped her paws into the shallows. She hadn't realized just how much she missed the feeling.

"Paws out," Sorrelmouse snipped, whipping her tail over Silverpaw's ears.

Silverpaw backed swiftly away from the river. "Sorry," she mumbled.

Sorrelmouse rolled her eyes. "It's been a while since you last trained with me. Keep your paws dry and show me what you

remember of how to fish while ashore."

Silverpaw nodded. Keeping her eyes halfway on her mentor, she knelt down at the water's edge. Her shoulders were tense and ready to move at a moment's notice.

"Try bunching your shoulders a little more."

Silverpaw reciprocated, shuffling slightly until her pose was more accurate.

"Good. Now wait."

Silverpaw obeyed, patiently waiting for the flicker of scales beneath the water's surface. Gradually, with the sun falling across the clear water, her reflection rippled into focus. Staring up at her with startled golden eyes was a horrendously scarred silver she-cat. The right side of her face was completely shredded, pink flesh weaving from the peak of her brow all the way to her jaw. Only slivers of fur remained between the stretching clawmarks.

Alarm shot through Silverpaw's veins and she scrambled away from the water's edge. A shriek pierced her lungs. Pebbles scattered from her fumbling paws as she fought for distance, her heart rate skyrocketing. "No," she gasped. *I look just like him!* Her mind flashed to the horrendous, battle-scarred rogue tom, his sightless blue eye burrowing into her soul. Had he done this on purpose? Did he know how much damage he would cause by making her scars match his?

Sorrelmouse was by Silverpaw's side in an instant, reaching out with a paw. "Silverpaw! Snap out of it," the warrior mewed. "Just breathe. You're okay."

Silverpaw cried out, her body shaking like a leaf in a windstorm. She rushed towards Sorrelmouse, burying her face in the red warrior's chest fur. Sorrelmouse stiffened. Her shoulders sagged. She curled her tail comfortingly around the apprentice, much like a mother would.

She gave a gentle lick between Silverpaw's ears. "There, there," she soothed. "You're all right."

Once Silverpaw's shivering mostly subsided, Sorrelmouse gently guided her to her paws. "That's enough for today. Let's get you back to camp."

Silverpaw nodded numbly, her head trapped in a realm of horrors.

"Honeywhisker, Paledusk," Sorrelmouse glanced at the two toms, who watched the departing she-cats with mystified expressions, "continue fishing until I return."

Paledusk nodded in acceptance, while Honeywhisker snorted, "As if we'll be able to catch anything after all that racket!"

"If the fish swam off, then go further downstream, you dense furball," Sorrelmouse snapped. Turning back to Silverpaw, she whisked her tail along the apprentice's flank. "Let's go."

With a solemn air hovering over them, Sorrelmouse guided the terrified apprentice back to camp.

❀

Happy Halloween, everybody! To celebrate the holiday (and my 7 year WattPad anniversary), I decided to upload an extra chapter this week.

Be sure to let me know your thoughts and feedback. I love hearing from you guys!

I hope you all enjoyed, and I can't wait to see you again on Friday. ~ Kitten

Chapter Six

[image]

Silverpaw was adjusting.

Though the feat seemed impossible, it turned out not to be as the silver apprentice fell back into a routine. Wake up, clean, go to sleep. Sorrelmouse had yet to take her back on a patrol of any sorts, more out of consideration than anything else, and though Silverpaw still hated chores, she couldn't help but feel gratitude towards her mentor. After all... she still couldn't bear to look at her own reflection, and camp-bound tasks kept her as far away from it as she could get.

Silverpaw sank her claws deep into the mossy tree. Her claws hooked in expertise, she pried away a large chunk of moss and flung it to the floor. She swung her claws again and again, moving in a methodical rhythm.

The bark's gnarled surface twisted as its layer of green began to dwindle. Pinpricks of gold began to shine along its surface, the rogue's face appearing with a menacing grin and piercing, honey-yellow eyes. Bristling, Silverpaw's hacking grew more desperate, spurred on by fear as she erratically shredded now splinter-filled moss.

She stopped as quickly as she'd begun.

"Oh, StarClan," she whispered, staring at the mess beneath her claws. She slipped them back into her sheathes, her heart pounding against her chest like a trapped bird.

Glancing over her shoulder, she swept the remains under a bush, turning an apologetic stare back to the tree. Guilt shredded through her. It was as if somebody had taken over her mind, disfiguring the tree into the rogue's haunting face. Even the figment of her imagination, however, was wrong. *His eyes were blue, not gold.* She choked back a sob. *I must be going crazy.*

Flicking her tail, she circled around the trunk to where more moss flourished. She reared onto her hindlegs and dug her claws into it. She carefully pried away a few more pawfuls of moss, dropping it to a different, unaffected pile that grew with every new swipe. Once satisfied, she returned her attention to the pile. Sorting through each scrap, she gave the chunks a thorough shake, jetting little droplets of collected moisture through the air. She scooped a large mouthful into her jaw and pressed the rest between her chin and chest.

She began the awkward struggle back to camp.

Once she reached the crossing stones, she recognized that the load would be too much for a safe crossing, so she left a small pile behind. The rest clenched between her teeth, Silverpaw leaped across the stones with a prowess only a RiverClan cat could possess. Maintaining the momentum from her final bound, she pushed swiftly into camp.

There was a very slight breeze, molding the perfect day for sharing tongues. Strewn across camp, cats lounged comfortably about, sunning themselves in the company of their Clanmates as they waited for the day's peak to end and for more patrols to be assigned.

Mistpaw was huddled in a corner of the camp with Ravenfire and Lichenpaw. Her eyes darted towards the silver tabby, brightening for a moment, before she caught herself. The dark she-cat returned her green gaze to Ravenfire, saying something that made the elder laugh loudly. Silverpaw watched her for a heartbeat, conflicted with herself. Sighing, she tore her eyes away.

Sorrelmouse, alongside Dappledfang, carried old bedding out of the nursery. The two spoke affectionately, their tails gliding over each other's shoulders. Finchkit and Pigeonkit scampered around their paws, flinging a small wad of moss back and forth. Flicking an agile paw, Finchkit sent the ball flying. It landed square on Dappledfang's nose.

Dappledfang rubbed his muzzle, his amber eyes sharpening into a glare. The little she-kit mewled an urgent apology, but her fear was

quickly quashed as the tom's fake scowl morphed into a mischievous smile. He grabbed the small bundle of moss and flung it far across the clearing. The kits squealed delightfully and took off in hot pursuit. Sorrelmouse laughed.

Outside of the medicine den, Wishfern shared a carp with Heatfur, while Pinestar was holding a meeting just outside of the willow tree with the more senior warriors of the Clan. Lionpoppy was among them. Her eyes periodically scanned the clearing, but she explicitly avoided her daughter.

Hurt stabbed at Silverpaw's heart. Shaking out her fur, she did her best to ignore it and trotted to the fallen oak that made up the elder's den. She gently placed her moss outside. "Excuse me?" She mewed softly, peering into the darkness.

Sandytail stirred, his thick brow pulled taut as he blinked over at Silverpaw. She could feel his blurry eyes aimlessly roaming her face.

"Yes? Who is it?" He grunted, his voice hoarse with age.

"It's Silverpaw. I'm here to change your bedding."

Sandytail huffed. "Can't you wait until sunhigh?"

Silverpaw's ears folded slightly. "It *is* sunhigh."

"So soon?" He huffed. He lingered in silence for a few moments. "Oh, fine. It's about time I get this terrible thing changed, I suppose." He heaved to his paws, his muscles trembling with the effort.

Silverpaw darted inside, gently pressing up against the elder's side. He protested feebly, but didn't fight as she guided him into the clearing. The old ginger tom squinted against the sunlight, muttering something about how '*ridiculously bright*' it was.

"Why don't you sit in the shade over there? It looks comfortable enough." Silverpaw gestured towards a corner of the camp, where the long, elegant leaves of the Clan's resident willow tree had settled across some branches, leaving a winding shadow across the

floor.

Sandytail squinted. "And you expect me to know what you're talking about?"

"I—" Silverpaw faltered, glancing at his sightless eyes. "No. Sorry, Sandytail. Would you be happy with some shade?"

The tom wrinkled his muzzle. "Yeah, sure, whatever. As long as it gets me out of this blasted sun, I'm happy."

Silverpaw nodded, and slowly, the two cats trudged across the clearing. They dipped underneath the overarching willow leaves, and Silverpaw found what appeared to be a comfortable dip in the ground for Sandytail to lie in.

"Here we are," she mewed, gently nudging the elder towards the space.

Sandytail sniffed the dip, sliding his forepaws in first, then sinking the rest of his body in. He harrumphed, tucking his chin against his paws. "Thanks," he grumbled. "Now, when you clean my nest, make sure you get me *dry* bedding. That rainstorm a few sunrises ago was a nasty one, and my nest is still damp, even though Ravenfire's kin claim to have changed it! Your brother's the only one who's always been on top of it, but now he's too busy with his training to visit me anymore." The tom shook his head. "Such a shame."

Silverpaw winced. "I wish that were the case."

Sandytail's foggy amber eyes lifted, staring past Silverpaw's saddened gaze. "StarClan," he rasped, his face shifting as he was hit with realization. "He's gone, isn't he?"

"He is," she replied quietly.

Sandytail shook his head solemnly. "And nobody thought to tell me me. Come, sit with me." He beckoned her over.

Silverpaw hesitated, her eyes darting across the clearing. She didn't want to talk about this, and Sorrelmouse was still working hard.

"Silverpaw?"

She blinked, swallowing the lump in her throat, and did as instructed. She settled down beside the large ginger tom, her spine prickling with unease.

"Now... it may not seem like it, but I know exactly how you feel. Have I ever told you about my brother?"

Silverpaw shook her head. "You had a brother?"

The old tom chuckled, leaning comfortably to the side. "That I did. He was a small cat, smaller than you, even!" Silverpaw's eyes widened, and an amused purr thrummed from the old tom's chest. "You see, the Clan never thought he'd be more than just a hunter, if even that. But of course, being Littlewish, he wanted to prove them wrong. 'Just because I'm short, doesn't mean I'm any less a warrior than you,' he'd tell us. He pushed himself hard in everything. Patrolling? He'd do so at *night*. Hunting? He'd bring back the most prey out of anyone. And in pushing himself as hard as he did... it was no surprise when he became deputy." His eyelids drooped, sadness following his words. "And one day... a badger settled upon our hunting grounds. He wanted to lead the patrol to chase it out.

He was excited. He knew he could do it. *I* knew he could do it. In fact, I was there. I joined his patrol to bear witness to his success. But... of course, life isn't perfect." His voice cracked, and he looked Silverpaw in the eye. She froze. It was as if the tom could see perfectly, the fogginess in his eyes gone, if only for a moment. "He was struck down in a single bow. Shattered his skull, that wretched beast. I couldn't even say goodbye."

"What did you do?" The apprentice breathed.

"Why, I drove out that fox-dung eating pelt of fleas!" Sandytail roared. "It took my brother from me, so I took away it's home."

The silver tabby flinched at the tom's explosive words. "But why?" She whispered. "Why did you continue to fight, even after he died?"

"I did it so his death wasn't in vain," he growled. "Littlewish fought

to defend his Clan. What right do I have to leave his deed unfinished?" he shook his head vehemently. "If I'd left that badger alone, wouldn't my brother's death have been worthless?"

Silverpaw paused and thought for a moment. "It wouldn't have been worthless..."

"But his death would've been for nothing," Sandytail grunted. "I finished what he started."

Finished what he started... Silverpaw echoed, guilt swarming over her as her mind revisited the fateful night of Owlpaw's death. She'd laid there, helpless as the rogues continued their assault. *I never even bothered to keep fighting... was his death really in vain?*

"It still hurts," Sandytail continued, stripping her from her thoughts. "I wish I'd done more to save him, but in the end, I know he's up there in StarClan, watching me and my kits as we live out our lives. He would be nothing but proud." His eyes regained their fogginess, his thick brow slowly lowering until he breathed a deep, lonesome sigh.

Silence fell between the two. Silverpaw leaned forward and gently touched her muzzle to the tom's cheek. He jolted in surprise, blinking his foggy eyes.

"Thank you for sharing this," she mewed.

Sandytail scoffed and pushed her away. "Enough with... whatever *that* was. I don't do 'affection.'" He rolled his shoulders, a scowl drawn across his face. "You should run along now. The day only lasts so long, and I'd like some bedding to sleep on tonight."

"Right. I'll go do that." Silverpaw gave her ruffled fur a shake and stood to her paws.

She dipped her head politely and slipped away, back to the elder's den. She brushed past the screen of lichen and emerged into the ancient log, stale air filling her lungs. She found her way to Sandytail's nest and clawed at the old bedding, recoiling as water oozed with each swipe.

"Great StarClan, how did he sleep in this?" She muttered to herself as she dragged the soaked bedding outside.

She replaced the moss with the fresh bedding she'd collected, gently fluffing it out with her claws. She gave the same treatment to the other nests within, though she had to make one more trip out of camp to fetch the rest of the material.

She finished mending the third and final nest, standing back to look proudly at her work. Not even a speck of bark tainted the beds of green, and she'd gone through an extra effort to ensure they were dry, lest Sandytail complain about his bones again.

She left the den. Already it was sunset. Her eyes followed the lines of clouds in the sky, mesmerized by its beauty. Sandytail and Nightfur quietly passed by and vanished into the ancient log, leaving the third and final elder in the company of her kin.

After some time, Silverpaw searched the darkening clearing for a familiar red figure. Spotting Sorrelmouse, she trotted over. The warrior was weaving new reeds into the nursery, patching up the weaker points where the wind would break in.

"Do you need any help?" Silverpaw offered.

Sorrelmouse shook her head. "I've got this last bit, but I'll need some help tending to the warrior's den tomorrow." Her eyes darted to the mess of brambles.

Even from where she stood, Silverpaw could see a plethora of gaps in the material, and the interwoven brambles and reeds were visibly beginning to fall apart at the seams. She nodded.

Sorrelmouse smiled, dropping to all fours and giving the apprentice a motherly lick between the ears. "Great job with Sandytail today. Not many can keep his temper under check," she purred. "Now, get yourself some rest. We have a long day waiting."

The silver tabby blinked up at the warrior, allowing a brief smile to enter her eyes. "Goodnight, then."

"Goodnight."

Without a second glance at the red she-cat, Silverpaw padded away. Inside the apprentice's den, she found her way to her nest, kneading into the shell-strewn material. She sighed, her gaze trailing to the nest beside her own, forever empty of what should've been a permanent presence.

Closing her eyes, Silverpaw scarcely noticed the pair of green eyes watching her from the depths of the den.

❀

If this chapter seems a little rushed, that's because it is! I accidentally started working on Chapter Eight and Seven before this one, and only realized on Wednesday that I still had to start this chapter—whoops! Even throughout my prior drafts, this specific chapter seems to be one of the most difficult to enjoy, and I'm not sure if it's even necessary to the story. I may come back to it in the future and either remove it or rework it once more, so please let me know your thoughts.

Anyways, I hope you guys enjoyed! See you again next week. ~ Kitten

Chapter Seven

[image]

"Why weren't you good enough?" Owlpaw yowled through his tears, spitting in Silverpaw's face.

"I-I tried, Owlpaw. I swear!"

"*As if!"* You sat there like a frightened kittypet and made *me* do all of the work. Now look at where I am! *I'm dead, and it's all your fault."*

"I didn't mean to, Owlpaw. I'm so sorry, I never should've taken you out of camp..." Silverpaw's voice trailed off as a sob wracked her chest.

"You're right. You never should've made me leave."

"Owlpaw..." Silverpaw took a step forward, but the tom reeled away with a snarl. His body slowly warped, unscarred and slick, now growing bloodied and unkempt.

"Nothing you say will bring me back. You're the one who led me away. And for *what?* To chase after rogues?" He laughed bitterly, stepping forward again, scoffing down his muzzle at his sister's trembling figure. "I said this before, and I'll say it again. We're not warriors, and now, I never will be. Thanks for nothing, *sister."*

Scratches continued to spread across his pelt until eventually, a gash gaped upon his throat. Blood oozed from the horrific injury and more dribbled down his chin, plopping painfully to the floor as a puddle of crimson grew and grew.

Silverpaw staggered backwards as sticky redness swallowed her paws. "No!" She cried, blood sweeping her off her paws and dragging her along in its violent flow, pulling her further and further away from her brother. "Owlpaw, wait! I'm sorry," she wailed, fighting fruitlessly against the river of blood. "Please don't

make me leave. I need you. I miss you! Let's go back to RiverClan—together!" Her voice cracked. "I can't lose you again."

"It's too late," Owlpaw's voice echoed across the infinite chamber, painfully splitting open her skull. "You already left me behind. And because of that, I'll *never* return."

Silverpaw screamed wordlessly to the air, sucking in one final breath as the crimson ooze closed over her head. *This isn't fair!* She thought as tears seeped down her cheeks, mingling in the river of horrors.

"Life isn't fair," Owlpaw's voice hissed past the roaring of blood. "You of all cats should know this. After all, I died to a failure like you."

❀

Silverpaw woke up with a start. Her pelt was sticky and warm, and her breathing came in labored gasps. Her entire body trembled as the metallic tang of blood faded from her tongue.

Her eyes, darting frantically along the walls of the den, finally settled to the side where Owlpaw's nest lay. Grief smothered her lungs. She sucked in a painful gasp, struggling to keep her sobs at bay. Instead of distracting herself, she focused single-mindedly on the moss. It was still trampled from when she woke him, contrary to his normal state. Always immaculate, fixing his bed nicely before grooming himself in preparation for the day. And his scent... it was just as fresh as it had been on that fateful night.

She breathed deeply, her brother's distinguished smell nearly overwhelming her in its intensity. *That must be why the nightmare was so real,* she realized, closing her eyes to steel herself. *It's as if he never left.*

When she reopened her eyes, Silverpaw found herself dazzled by her brother's nest. Little flecks of silver sparkled lightly up at her, reflecting moonlight and bringing back the memory of when they'd gone to collect decorations for their nests. Silverpaw had wanted pink seashells. The color always appealed to her, and she admired

the shell-strewn nests adorning the nursery. Her mother's own nest was decorated with white, while Owlpaw wanted something different. He'd wanted fish scales.

The brown tom had spent weeks devoting himself to the activity. Every meal, he'd pluck scales off his fresh-kill; primarily silver minnows, to add to his nest. Silverpaw had always found it strange. In fact, she'd continuously teased him about it. But as usual with his carefree self, Owlpaw had shrugged her off.

"You're such a weirdo!" Silverpaw laughed, watching her brother meticulously dig his claws into the fish's flesh, peeling away scale after scale with delicate shifts of his arms.

"Am not," he retorted quickly, batting her nose with his tail.

Silverpaw swatted him away. "Are too! Look at you, you're literally dissecting a fish. It's so gross."

"It'll be worth it. You'll see." Owlpaw smiled eagerly, maintaining his focus.

Her shoulders sagged. *I can see it now.* But why not before? Why couldn't she have appreciated him while he was still alive? "I'm sorry," she whispered, pressing her nose to the rim of his nest. "I'm so sorry."

Her eyelids were heavy, slowly slipping shut. As darkness crowded the corners of her vision, so did her nightmare, and her eyes snapped back open.

Though exhaustion weighed at her limbs, fear entrenched her body at the thought of returning to the horrors that haunted her dreams. The tang of metal had returned to her tongue, and she could nearly taste Owlpaw's fury as he itched at the barest corners of her consciousness.

She lay still for what felt like moons, until finally, she hauled herself to her paws. Giving her pelt a furious shake, Silverpaw crept silently into the moonlit clearing. The sky was clear and the moon was a little ways past its halfway point. She was met by a nearly

deafening silence, interrupted by the softest gurgle of the river. Studying the area around her, she noted that nobody else was awake, other than the camp guard.

"Sorrelmouse?" She mewed in surprise, recognizing her mentor's slim red form, nestled beneath a shelter of ferns, her keen eyes turned outside the camp.

Sorrelmouse shifted, glancing over her shoulder. "What are you doing up so late?" She asked, beckoning the apprentice to her side.

Silverpaw cautiously approached, her tail dragging along the ground behind her. "I couldn't sleep."

Sorrelmouse studied her. "Nightmares?"

Silverpaw nodded.

Sorrelmouse's golden eyes flickered around the clearing. Abruptly, she stood to her paws. "Come," she hummed thoughtfully, giving Silverpaw a prompting nudge. "I need to take you somewhere."

"Don't you need to guard the camp?" Silverpaw asked leerily.

Sorrelmouse's eyes gleamed. "Our Clanmates will be fine for one night. RiverClan is the strongest Clan around the lake, after all."

Silverpaw hesitated. She wanted to protest, but Sorrelmouse *did* have a point. What were the chances that the one night the camp guard left their duty would be the night an intruder came?

"Okay..."

"That's my girl," Sorrelmouse purred. "Come on, I have something I need to show you."

With a warm smile, the red warrior slipped out of camp. Silverpaw followed a few tail-lengths behind, casting a worried glance back at the empty camp. *Sorrelmouse said they'll be fine, so they'll be fine,* she reassured herself.

Silverpaw leaped from stone to stone, her mind flashing to her dream as she studied the running water. She recalled the blood rising around her, the wound tearing across Owlpaw's throat, and the fear shining in his eyes. His fear, and the *anger.*

She was ripped from her thoughts as Sorrelmouse touched the tip of her ear with her nose. "Get your head out of the clouds and pay attention," she murmured. "You were about to wander off."

Silverpaw blinked, stopping in her tracks. "Sorry," she mumbled, falling back into step with the red warrior.

"Don't apologize," Sorrelmouse chastised lightly. "It's the middle of the night. I understand you're tired."

Silverpaw opened her mouth again, but caught herself, biting her tongue instead. She hurried to keep pace with her mentor.

As they padded through the woods, her eyes flashed around. The forest was an entirely different beast at night. Shadows flooded the earth, covering anything that might be hiding inside. She watched the darkness, an anxiety growing in her chest, waiting for the faintest flicker of eyes or claws.

No. The rogues can't be here. Not in the heart of the territory. She forced her eyes ahead, the tip of her tail twitching minutely with every step.

The two cats grew nearer to the edge of the territory, the last place Silverpaw wanted to be. Her pace slowed significantly. Sorrelmouse, however, kept moving, not even glancing back at the apprentice. Swallowing her fear, Silverpaw proceeded, keeping close to her mentor. It was only a moment until she pulled her tail across Silverpaw's path.

"We're here," Sorrelmouse mewed softly.

Silverpaw frowned. There was nothing special about the moonlit clearing. A few bushes lay scattered about, and the trees stared intimidatingly down at them, silhouetted by the night sky, but that was it.

"I don't understand."

Sorrelmouse looked at Silverpaw. She gave a small smile, she pushed through a thicket. Silverpaw slowly followed after her, the soft tufts of grass smoothing into bare stone. The rockface ended a few tail-lengths ahead, displaying a canvas of treetops.

Silverpaw froze for a few stunned heartbeats.

"Come on," Sorrelmouse encouraged softly, beckoning the apprentice with the slightest tilt of her head.

Silverpaw obeyed. Her tail hovered close to the ground and her ears remained pressed against her skull. Wind bit at her skin, whisking chillily through her fur and into swirling patterns in the sky. When she reached the edge of the cliff, she folded her paws beneath her and sat down, but her joints remained stiff and ready to bolt.

Sorrelmouse still hadn't said a word, so Silverpaw took the moment to survey what lay beyond the rocky outcropping. Frankly, the view was stunning, giving her a bird's eye view of RiverClan territory. The woods stretched on for what appeared to be forever, the colorful trees split apart by woven veins of water. Even further beyond, Silverpaw could see the lake, the quartered moon an ominous reflection across its shimmering surface.

"Relax," Sorrelmouse purred, running her tail along Silverpaw's spine, "and breathe. What do you smell?"

Silverpaw inhaled deeply. Scents flooded into her lungs like never before, crisp and clear without the density of the canopy to contain it. "I smell trees, birds, water... our territory." She paused, allowing her nostrils to flare. "What's so special about it?"

"It's special because it's our home," Sorrelmouse explained simply. "We *belong* here. No other cats, no other animal, not even the twolegs. It offers us warmth in leaf-bare, shade in green-leaf, and food when we need it.

Silverpaw frowned. "I know that already."

"You may know it, but you've yet to *embrace* it."

"What do you mean by that?"

Sorrelmouse closed her eyes peacefully, a soft smile playing at her lips. "Let the scents and smells of the territory, of your home, soothe your mind. It will always be here for you, even in your darkest of hours. Regardless of how many times the seasons change, of how significantly your life may change, your home will forever remain. You'll *always* belong in RiverClan, no matter what happened before, nor what comes next."

Silverpaw shivered as the wind chilled her. "No matter what happened before?" she whispered. "I... I can't keep from worrying, Sorrelmouse. The thought can't soothe me, not when Owlpaw is gone."

"Yes, it can." Sorrelmouse gave Silverpaw a comforting lick between the ears.

Struggling to conform her thoughts to words, Silverpaw tucked her tail tightly around her. She turned her head away from her mentor. "I don't feel safe in my own nest anymore, Sorrelmouse," she bit out. "Those rogues weren't just there to hurt Owlpaw. They said he was a *message*." Her eyes flashed desperately. "Doesn't that mean they'll attack again? Who will die next?" She trembled. "I've already lost my brother, and... in a way, Lionpoppy. What if I lose *you?"*

"Your mother... is a tough one." Sorrelmouse's eyes softened affectionately. "Though she may be blinded by grief, deep down, I know she still loves you. A queen's love isn't so easily forgotten. And as I've told you before," she continued, "loss is something we as warriors must learn to face. Even if, physically, I've left you, I'll still be by your side, no matter what." She indicated to the stars above. "Your brother is, too. I'm sure of it."

"And what about the rogues?" she mumbled. "They'll be back, I'm sure of it."

"Perhaps they will, but you can't let that drag you down,

Silverpaw. Especially not while we're here." She hesitated. "This place... I come here when I'm at my lowest, whenever I'm blaming myself for the loss of my kits. It makes me feel at peace, as if they've finally chosen to forgive me."

Silverpaw's eyes flashed to her mentor. "Why would they need to forgive you? It's not your fault they died."

Sorrelmouse chuckled, flicking her tail over Silverpaw's ears. "That's exactly what I've been trying to tell you, Silverpaw. Though it's easy to blame yourself for actions outside of your control, your mind will always attempt to. You must push through it and see the reality."

Silverpaw's mouth bobbed. Unsure of what to say, she uttered, "I'm sorry."

Sorrelmouse snorted. "What did I say about apologizing? Cut it out."

"I—" Silverpaw stopped herself. "Yes, Sorrelmouse."

Sorrelmouse gently bumped the apprentice with her shoulder, a small laugh bubbling from her chest. Silverpaw couldn't help but smile in response, her grief melting for only a moment as she looked up at her mentor's glowing expression.

Sorrelmouse leaned close to Silverpaw, curling her tail around the apprentice. Silverpaw gradually relaxed under her mentor's embrace, a sigh fleeing her lips as she lifted her gaze to the star-spangled sky. Her eyes lingered over Silverpelt, the thickest stretch of stars in the night.

"You think he's watching me?" She whispered.

"Of course he is," Sorrelmouse mewed. "He's your brother."

"And your kits. Do you think they're watching, too?"

Sorrelmouse hesitated. "Yes, I think so. That, or they're keeping a close watch on their father. He needs their guidance more often than I do."

Silverpaw chuckled softly, and the two eased into silence. Scents wreathed around her, and gradually, she felt herself completely relax. The smell of the lake, the land, and the creatures that roamed soothed her thoughts, just as Sorrelmouse said they would.

It felt like moons had passed when Sorrelmouse finally stretched to her paws. "I think it's time for us to head back. We have a busy day tomorrow—you don't want to doze off in the middle of repairs, now do you?"

Silverpaw shook her head. "I'd rather not," she purred.

"Good." Sorrelmouse bounded back down the rocky incline with a light smile, disappearing through the brush and back into the trees.

Silverpaw lingered for a moment longer, staring at the stars. *Please, forgive me,* she silently prayed. Flicking her tail, she rose to her paws and eagerly followed. Her pawsteps were lighter than they had been since Owlpaw died.

"Thank you," she mewed once she caught up to her mentor. She brushed her pelt against the red warrior's fur.

Sorrelmouse glanced down at her. "I'm glad I could share this place with you, Silverpaw," she said softly. "It was meant to be for Evefrost eventually, once she expected her first litter, but... some moments will forever be lost, and instead can be shared with others."

Silverpaw blinked up at the warrior. Sorrelmouse's golden eyes were glittering with unshed tears. Gratitude swelled in the apprentice's chest as she realized the true meaning behind this moment, and she pressed closer to the warrior, unable to put her appreciation into words.

A warm, motherly smile crested Sorrelmouse's face, fueling an expansion of love in Silverpaw's chest. The silver tabby released a contended purr.

A familial tranquility hung over the two as they made their way back to camp, their tails entwined.

Chapter Eight

[image]

Silverpaw waded into the muddy water, watching as her paws submerged into darkness, then her elbows, and then the tips of her belly fur. Sorrelmouse was considerate enough to take her to the Muddy Shallows; an area of their territory where the water was murky and reflectionless, and the river had slowed to a snail's crawling pace. She wasn't quite back to her regular schedule, but she was inching her way closer. This was the first time Sorrelmouse had taken her to perform something other than cleaning duties.

Lichenpaw was in attendance with her mentor, too. She was awfully quiet, though that was typical of her. Her blue eyes periodically flashed towards her silver-striped companion, an unspoken question lingering in the depths of her gaze.

"What types of prey can you usually find in the marsh?" Sorrelmouse asked from the shoreline.

"Catfish," Silverpaw mumbled, watching the dark water through narrowed eyes. "Stripers, mudcrabs, and..." a flicker of movement, a shadow within the shadows, darted across her vision. She lurched forward, and with a nimble swipe of her claws, a mud-covered shape flicked out of the water. She jumped and caught it in her mouth, its serrated fins slicing the edges of her mouth. "Sunfish!" She exclaimed around the flapping tail.

Sorrelmouse purred in amusement. "Excellent catch. Bring it over."

Obediently, Silverpaw bit more deeply and trudged towards the shore. The water itself was only about a whisker-length deep, but the mud below that sank her down to her belly. She pulled herself out with a vigorous shake of her fur, sending mud and water splattering everywhere.

She placed the now-deceased fish onto the slowly growing pile on the shore, uttering her silent thanks to StarClan. Already there were

two other fish caught from their patrol; a small catfish and a thin minnow. Silverpaw turned around to face Sorrelmouse, who nodded encouragingly. She turned back around and dove into the water.

Silverpaw and Owlpaw had always hated the Muddy Shallows. As per its namesake, the water was shallow and muddy. *Very* muddy. After a day of fishing, the two would return to camp with pelts caked in dried mud, and after that, they'd sit hours into the night helping to groom each other.

But now... there was nobody to help her clean her fur. Nobody to laugh with. Nobody to get into mischief with. Silverpaw absently gazed around at the cypress trees, buzzing with insectlife. Her stomach twisted. *And now,* she could see far more detail in the land around her, far much more life. Life that could easily be swiped away with a single pair of blood-stained claws. She shuddered, curling her claws inward, feeling mud stuff beneath them.

"I caught one!" A shrill voice cut her from her thoughts.

Silverpaw blinked over to see Lichenpaw standing proudly, her paws spread apart in the water and a muddy catfish flapping indignantly in her mouth. The apprentice's blue eyes glowed joyously.

Behind her, her mentor beamed with pride, and he leaped into the water with her. "See? I knew you could do it."

The tom helped her stabilize and dispatch the large fish, and together they hauled it ashore. Lichenpaw's eyes shone with excitement. She'd always struggled with fishing, and scarcely brought home any prey. A catch—especially one as large as that—was impressive regardless of who caught it, and even more so seeing it from her.

"Congratulations," Silverpaw purred. "I'm jealous."

Lichenpaw laughed softly, flicking her tail along Silverpaw's flank. "*You?* Jealous? You're the master of hunting among us apprentices."

Silverpaw scoffed. "Maybe before, but certainly not anymore.

Toadpaw greatly surpasses me."

"Only when he's paying attention," Lichenpaw's tone was quiet, as usual, but her smile was broad.

Silverpaw grinned in return. "Only when he's paying attention," she agreed, wading back into the murky water, her eyes glued to its unwavering surface.

Though happiness was far out of reach to the apprentice, she was beginning to find it easier to experience small bursts of it. Smiling was no longer a foreign concept, even if it felt wrong sometimes. She was trying to embrace the world around her—her friends, in particular. She knew she'd never stop blaming herself for Owlpaw's death, but maybe, *just maybe,* she could experience a bright future, as long as she could conquer her fears of the world around her.

"Well done, both of you," Sorrelmouse purred, surveying the pile of fish. "Let's call it a day at sunhigh. The Clan will be fed well tonight."

Nodding, Silverpaw glanced up at the sky. The sun was nearly halfway to its peak. The quartet had left camp right at the brink of dawn, and had been hunting for a few hours now. *A few more to go,* she noted, wading back into the water, watching as her paws were consumed by dark shadows. If their luck continued, they could double the amount of prey and bring back an impressive haul.

As the patrol splashed around in the marsh, Silverpaw found Lichenpaw hanging closeby. Her blue eyes were hesitant, flashing in her direction, then back to the water.

She opened her mouth to speak, but the darker she-cat cut to the chase first. "How are you holding up?" She mewed softly, batting a paw at the water's murky surface. "You know, after what happened..."

Silverpaw grimaced, her mood souring in an instant. "Is this really all anybody can think to speak to me about?" She muttered, her voice raw with pain. "I'm more than just my brother."

"That's not at all what I meant," Lichenpaw hurried. "This whole situation affects me, too. I want to talk about it." She tilted her head thoughtfully. "It's better to, for you and those around you."

"And if *I* don't want to?"

Lichenpaw's mouth bobbed, her tail falling into the water, tracing emptily along the surface. "I... don't know."

"It's just that... I don't know the story, Silverpaw. All I understand is what other cats have said—you, betraying your brother; a pack of murderous rogues; a horrible accident. But you haven't said a thing. I want to know what *really* happened that night, not what runs the gossip."

Silverpaw scoffed. "Do you believe any of it?"

Lichenpaw hesitated. "All I believe is that whatever happened, it was horrible. For both you *and* Owlpaw." She spoke her words slowly, deliberately. She never was one to talk much. It was clear that this conversation was important to her.

"And why should you be the one I tell? Why shouldn't I just keep it to myself?"

The dark she-cat was quiet for a few moments. Silverpaw glanced over; her eyes were like determined blue flames, staring deep into the abyss of murky water beneath her. Then, she lifted her eyes.

"Because I loved him," she hissed softly.

Silverpaw jolted. The words were far from what she expected. "You loved him?" She breathed.

Lichenpaw nodded stiffly. "He used to sneak out every night by himself," she explained. "I decided to follow him one day, and caught him training. So... I asked him to help me." She shuffled her paws. "One thing led to the next, and our training sessions became something... more. We began talking more than training, sitting together, even playing under the moonlight. And of course, I fell in love with him. I think it was mutual." She looked up again. "That's why I think you should tell me. I deserve to know."

Silverpaw fell quiet, peeling her eyes away to stare at the algae-covered water. She spied for any flicker of movement, *anything* to disrupt the conversation at hand. *If she really did love him...* her eyes flickered to Lichenpaw for a fleeting moment, *maybe she does deserve to know.*

She sighed, glancing over her shoulders. Sorrelmouse and Nightpatch were far away, wading through their own spots in the water. Yet, they were still too close for comfort.

"Let's move."

Lichenpaw followed silently as Silverpaw trudged through the water. Her thoughts were a whirlwind of emotion. Had Owlpaw truly been meeting with Lichenpaw every night? *It must be how he knew of the exit in the dirtplace,* she realized with a start. She glanced back, regarding Lichenpaw from the corner of her eye. Her mouth felt parched.

She lifted her muzzle to the sky, droplets of water shining on her whiskers with a deep breath. *StarClan,* how much didn't she know about her brother? She thought they knew nearly everything about one another—clearly, she was wrong, but he certainly knew everything about *her.* There wasn't a single thing she'd hidden from him.

She pushed through some cattails where she came to a halt on a small stretch of land, out of view of their mentors. Hesitation pounded in her chest as she sat down.

Her tail flicked anxiously back and forth, and at last, she whispered, "It was a dream."

Puzzled, Lichenpaw stared at her. "A dream?"

"I had a dream that we'd fight off some rogues," she explained slowly. "That we'd be made warriors early. I thought it was a sign from StarClan, he thought I was being a kit. But I managed to convince him to sneak out with me." She sighed deeply. "Maybe it *was* a sign of sorts, but it wasn't anything that I'd have expected. We did find the rogues, but..." she shuddered, "they wanted us dead.

One of us, as a message. Owlpaw being Owlpaw managed to put up a good fight, but I was captured and in his efforts to save me, he was chosen to die. After that... they tortured me."

She shrugged absently, phantom agony scoring through her pelt as if she were there all over again, her face shredded by the rogue tom, his milky white, sightless eye pouring into her soul.

"Happy now?" She looked up to Lichenpaw, her throat tight.

Reliving that night haunted her every movement, her every dream. Reciting it a second time wasn't as bad as she'd expected, but she still despised it. The only time she'd shared the story was when Pinestar, Salmonskip, and Wishfern had crowded around her nest, requesting answers.

"I'm sorry," Lichenpaw mewed, "but how did you know where to find them in the first place?"

Silverpaw chuckled bitterly. "I'd come across their scent during a patrol the day before."

"And you didn't report it to Pinestar?"

Silverpaw grimaced. "Owlpaw said the same thing," she muttered. "No, I didn't think much of it at the time. I only remembered because of that dream."

Lichenpaw nodded slowly, wordlessly. "I don't think you're entirely at fault," she said at last. "But you're not blameless, either. You should've told somebody about the scent when you had the chance, and maybe things would've turned out differently."

Silverpaw scoffed, rising to her paws. "I told you what happened," she mewed brusquely, "so let's return to fishing before our mentors come looking for us."

Lichenpaw blinked her blue eyes in surprise, parting her mouth for protest, but she stopped herself and instead nodded in acceptance. The two apprentices pushed out of the shrubbery and waded back into the mud, spying the murky water for any flickers of life.

By the time it was sunhigh, the patrol had caught a few more fish; a haul impressive enough to afford them two trips. Silverpaw helped Lichenpaw carry her catfish. The dark she-cat's eyes were glossed with grief, and an air of discomfort weighed between them on their trip. The fish was heavy, even with two cats struggling to hold it, but they made it to camp and deposited it.

There were a few cats back from their patrols, lounging underneath the afternoon sun, and already the other hunting patrol had returned, stacking the fresh-kill pile high.

Lichenpaw, Silverpaw, and their mentors left swiftly to retrieve the rest of their prey, each grabbing a couple of fish each.

Unfortunately, when the patrol made their final return, Silverpaw found Lionpoppy waiting just inside the entrance, her amber eyes as sharp as clawtips.

"Your friends came back," she hissed as Silverpaw tried to swiftly brush by. "You'd better watch your back, *apprentice*. I know what you're up to."

Silverpaw froze in her tracks, dropping her fish. "What do you mean, my friends?"

Lionpoppy stood up. "You know exactly who I'm talking about, you insolent little—"

The reeds shuddered. Sorrelmouse padded inside, the muddy carp in her mouth and her eyes full of silent anger. The two warriors stared at each other in silence.

"Nevermind," Silverpaw's mother snarled, turning her nose away. "You'll know what I'm saying soon enough."

Pelt prickling in unease, Silverpaw snatched up her prey and brushed past the remaining reeds.

Sitting outside the medicine den, her body marred with injuries was Spiderfrost. Her eye was clawed out, clumps were missing from her fur, and she bore a terrified grimace. As her blue gaze flitted to the camp entrance, she froze, meeting Silverpaw's golden eyes.

"Lionpoppy said—" the warrior gasped, lurching to her paws. "*You* did this?"

Silverpaw remained frozen in place, nearly choking on her words. "I did what?"

Spiderfrost moaned. "Can't you see?" Her tail lashed erratically. "My eye! My brother..." She spun around, the heartbreak in her eyes fixed to the medicine den. "It's bad. So, so bad."

Sorrelmouse's eyes sharpened, and she touched her muzzle to Silverpaw's ear, "Drop off your prey and find something to do," she ushered. "You shouldn't be seeing this."

Silverpaw still didn't move. *Shouldn't be seeing this? But I already have.* She thought, staring despairingly at the ginger warrior's injuries. There was so much blood flaking her pelt, and her crazed wails only added to the horror.

Lichenpaw snapped Silverpaw out of her trance, giving her a sharp nudge. "Listen to Sorrelmouse," the quiet she-cat urged. "Come on, I can help you."

Swallowing the lump in her throat, Silverpaw nodded. Lichenpaw repositioned herself to block Silverpaw's view with her black body, her blue eyes lingering on the silver tabby as they trudged to the fresh-kill pile. They dropped their prey in a numbing silence, and Lichenpaw continued to burrow through the pile.

"Trout, yeah?"

Silverpaw's eyes snapped to the black she-cat. "What?"

"Your favorite food's trout?" Lichenpaw asked patiently.

"Uh, yes."

Lichenpaw snatched up a fish from the pile, gently nudging Silverpaw towards a corner in the clearing. As they settled down, Silverpaw peered past her shoulders; ferns and reeds blocked her gaze from the rest of the camp. She took a shuddering breath and looked to her friend.

"Thank you," she murmured.

Lichenpaw stiffly nodded. "You're welcome."

There was a tense silence between them as Silverpaw ate her food. She warily watched Lichenpaw between every bite, before she at last uttered, "So... you believe me?"

Lichenpaw blinked at her. She nodded.

Silverpaw sighed. "Thank you."

The two she-cats remained there, sharing the fresh-kill for a while longer. The ferns rustled and another figure slipped over; Sorrelmouse.

"Things have calmed down out there," she mewed, squeezing next to Silverpaw. She gave her a gentle lick around the ear. "Are you okay?"

Stiffly, she nodded, though her thoughts meandered back to Spiderfrost and Cloudgaze. Was the tom okay? What exactly happened?

Was it actually the rogues?

She shivered and pushed the thought down, focusing intently on her trout, which was nearly all gone now.

"Don't worry about it too much," Sorrelmouse soothed, "it was a fox attack. Cloudgaze should survive, and Spiderfrost will recover, though she's lost an eye."

"Foxes my tail," Lionpoppy shouted from outside. Immediately, Silverpaw's head snapped up, bile rising to her throat. "There was crowfood all over the place! *Somebody* led those things here, and Silverpaw's the only one with a history like that."

"*History?"* Sorrelmouse recoiled, spinning around to glare at Lionpoppy, who'd stuck her muzzle through the ferns. "Stop with the nonsense already, Lionpoppy! I know you're grieving, but for StarClan's sake—that's your *daughter*, and she lost her brother! She

needs you, not—not this fox-dung you're spewing."

"I have no daughter," Lionpoppy coldly snarled.

A growl rolled from Sorrelmouse's chest, and she shoved Lionpoppy away. "Then leave this poor apprentice alone."

Lionpoppy's amber eyes shot past the red warrior's figure, burning into Silverpaw's eyes. There was an agonizing silence as the two stared at each other. Silverpaw's heart thundered in her ears, a twist of hope among the anguish.

The pale tabby scoffed and whirled away, storming back into the clearing.

Sorrelmouse turned back to Silverpaw. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "You don't deserve this."

Silverpaw remained silent, staring at her claws as they flexed in and out of the earth.

I have no mother.

❀

Hey guys! Here we are with a brand new chapter! Things get slow for a little while, and I realized that I need some item of interest for Silverpaw to mull over before things pick up again, on top of the fact that I feel we need to establish her relationship with Lichenpaw a bit more. While she's friends with the three siblings (Lichenpaw, Mistpaw, and Toadpaw), Silverpaw isn't as close with Lichenpaw as she is with the others, due to her quieter nature. This doesn't mean, however, that they are completely absent of friendship, and I thought I should establish that. I also wanted some more Sorrelmouse content, and to officially write Lionpoppy's disowning of her daughter.

Additionally, I have made some slight updates to the next 2 chapters to make this one more relevant. Feel free to read them again to see what has changed--it wasn't anything huge, though, so it isn't necessary! I'll likely do some more thorough

edits in the future.

Last but not least, updates haven't quite started up again, but they will return soon!

Thanks for reading! ~ Kitten

Chapter Nine

[image]

The camp reigned under silence in the early morning. The sun lingered just beneath the horizon, only interpreted by the barest glimmers of light against the starry sky. The singing of crickets at last fell into silence at the first sign of morning, intercepted by an eerie quiet, patiently waiting for the first bird to greet the day.

The trees surrounding the camp were mostly bare of their leaves, their branches stretching outwards like spindly fingers. Leaf-bare was unofficially upon them. While a few weeks of leaf-fall still technically remained, the cold season was coming quicker than ever —according to Silverpaw's elder Clanmates, at least. She had no room to judge.

She was already awake and sitting in the clearing. She embraced the pre-dawn silence with a soft breath, the cool air nipping at her lungs. It had been a few weeks since the riverside incident, and a few days since the fox attack. In that time, Silverpaw had found herself cleaning dens, tending to the nursery—where Pigeonkit and Finchkit tried relentlessly to distract her with their antics—and spending every evening with Sandytail. Amid the mixed feelings from her Clan, the gruff tom was slowly beginning to warm to her.

Today, however, things would be different. Sorrelmouse had at last admitted that it was time for Silverpaw to return to her normal training. It was an exciting thought, but anxiety overpowered anything she could be looking forward to.

Silverpaw fidgeted as the sun, now peeking above the horizon, glittered down into the clearing. Birds whistled their sing-song tune, and the warrior's den rustled. Salmonskip, with his teeth bared in a gaping yawn, tiredly emerged. His gray fur was unkempt with sleep, and if he was surprised by Silverpaw's early presence, he didn't let it show as he paused to briefly groom himself.

The den continued to rustle as more warriors emerged and

dispersed about the clearing. Light chatter began to fill the air as the cats waited to be assigned to the next patrol. Silverpaw's ears pricked as three freshly awoken warriors, Crowspots, Wolfpounce, and Swimleap, settled down nearby. Swimleap dragged a meaty squirrel over by the tail.

Swimleap nosed the prey with a paw, her brow furrowed as she searched past the fur. Finally, she took a dainty nibble from the flesh, wrinkling her nose distastefully, but continuing to divulge herself regardless. "I don't understand how the other Clans can stand all this fur," she grumbled. "Do any of you want to share? I doubt I can finish this entire thing on my own."

Wolfpounce gingerly joined her, while Crowspots remained where she was. She eyed the squirrel with repugnance. "No thanks," the old warrior rasped.

"Your loss," Swimleap chuffed, flicking her tail dismissively to her former mentor.

The trio of cats grew quieter as they continued to absently discuss warrior matters. Silverpaw was about ready to head off in search of Sorrelmouse, when at last something caught her attention. She strained her ears to hear what they were saying.

"Did anybody tell you what Heatfur and I found on the border yesterday?" Swimleap asked quietly, swallowing a mouthful of meat.

"No," Wolfpounce responded.

Crowspots shook her head curiously.

Swimleap's eyes darted around. Flicking her silver tail, she hunched her shoulders. "Crowfood," she hissed. "All along the border. It looked like it was there overnight, collecting flies and this *horrific* odor. Pinestar, Salmonskip, and Wishfern went out shortly after we reported it. I think they were investigating, maybe even cleaning it up." She leaned back, her whiskers quivering. "You think it had something to do with those rogues? Y'know, the one Lionpoppy's kit says attacked her?"

Silverpaw's thoughts whirled. *Crowfood along the border... was Lionpoppy right? Were the foxes really lured here?* Her stomach churned at the thought, and she held back a shudder.

"It very well could be," Wolfpounce grunted. "You don't think *she* did it, do you?"

Swimleap shrugged. "I don't know enough to say, but Lionpoppy sure thinks so."

"That apprentice is too weak to have taken down her brother," Crowspots snorted. "It's definitely a couple of bloodthirsty rogues. If anything else, it could even be ShadowClan sniffing around. I think Pinestar is taking this whole ordeal too passively—we should strike them down while we have the chance!"

"Hush, Crowspots," Wolfpounce hissed. "We don't—"

"Good morning, Silverpaw."

Silverpaw lurched around, forgetting the conversation in an instant as she found herself face-to-face with Toadpaw. "What are you doing here?" She exclaimed.

Toadpaw shrugged. "Waiting for Crowspots to take me fishing." He angled his ears to the elderly warrior.

Silverpaw followed his gaze, embarrassment pricking at her paws. "Of course," she muttered.

"Were you eavesdropping?"

Silverpaw scowled at the tom's mischievous grin. "No."

"Are you *sure* about that? It looked like you were eavesdropping, Silverpaw." He shouldered her heartily.

Her ears burned, and she shoved him back, flicking her tail irritably. "I wasn't!" She retorted indignantly.

Toadpaw barked a laugh. "Look at you, all flustered," he teased. "Don't be embarrassed, I do it all the time myself." He winked. "It's

interesting to hear what the warrior's have to say."

"But I wasn't," Silverpaw insisted.

Toadpaw lifted a brow. "If you say so. Whatever in the world is up with you and Mistpaw, anyways? I haven't seen you go this long without speaking since we were kits."

Silverpaw looked away, remembering the guilty shine in her friend's eyes. "It was nothing."

"Whatever this *nothing* was, you'd better make up with her soon. I can tell it's affecting the both of you," he commented, his voice oddly serious. Then, with a brisk shake of his pelt, he brightened. "Say, are you hungry? It looks like the early patrol just came back."

Silverpaw whirled around. Aspentail and Heatfur were leaving the now-stocked fresh-kill pile. "I'm not that hungry," she said.

"*Sure* you are. Wait right here, I'll go get us something to share," Toadpaw dismissed her. Before she could protest, he was already bounding across the clearing.

She watched him, snorting softly in disbelief as he nosed his way through the stack of fish. He trotted back to her side with a young perch dangling from his mouth. He dropped it to the floor and pushed it over to her. She blinked down at the fresh-kill. Her stomach churned, but the eager look in Toadpaw's eyes prompted her. She took a small bite.

Smiling, Toadpaw joined her, and the two ate in an easy silence, though Silverpaw occasionally caught her friend's bright green eyes studying her.

Once satisfied, Silverpaw leaned back and drew a paw neatly across her whiskers. "Thanks," she mewed as she cleaned her face.

"It's no problem. I've missed hanging out with you, you know," Toadpaw commented, quietly analyzing her expression. She shifted awkwardly, but didn't offer a response.

They sat together for a short while longer until Sorrelmouse

trotted over, her red tail high over her spine. "Are you ready for a border patrol, Silverpaw?" She asked brightly.

Silverpaw rose to her paws and gave her pelt a brisk shake. "As ready as I'll ever be, I guess." She glanced back at her friend. "Bye, Toadpaw."

"Goodbye." He waved his tail in farewell.

Sorrelmouse brushed her tail along Silverpaw's flank, guiding her to the camp entrance where Nosefleck, Paledusk, and Dappledfang sat in wait. Dappledfang perked up at the sight of his mate, trotting happily over to greet her. The pale tom butted his head against hers, murmuring so softly that Silverpaw couldn't pick up his words.

Purring in amusement, Sorrelmouse pried herself away from the tom and turned to look at the gathered cats. "We'll be heading to the ShadowClan boundary today," she declared, steering the group out of camp. "They've been testing our borders lately, so make sure you mark it extra well."

"I swear I found some rabbit remains the other day, too," Paledusk added gruffly.

"And that's exactly why we'll let them know that we don't tolerate trespassing," Sorrelmouse acknowledged. She cast a glance down to Silverpaw, smiling encouragingly. Then, she swiftly darted across the crossing stones.

Silverpaw waited for the rest of the warriors to pass, and once they all reached the other side, they moved in silence through the trees, growing closer to the lake until she could see the large expanse of water just beyond the treeline. There was a gentle breeze in the air, carrying to her the refreshing taste of water.

The forest slowly changed as they grew closer to ShadowClan's hunting grounds. Evergreen trees began to speckle the barren woodlands, until their bright green needles completely overwhelmed the sky, and the sickly stink of pine sap encroached the air.

They hadn't even reached the scentline when Silverpaw was overwhelmed by the potent smell of ShadowClan. Her brow knitted into a frown. *This can't be right,* she thought, parting her jaw to drink in the scents. *We're not even at the border yet. It smells almost as if...*

"They're invading our territory!" Nosefleck hissed, finishing Silverpaw's thoughts. The gray warrior bristled in rage, and Silverpaw dropped to a crouch, adrenaline pumping through her paws.

"Quiet." Sorrelmouse raised her tail, her golden eyes flitting among the trees. "The scent is strong; they're still nearby." Her tail fell back down in a great wave. At this signal, the patrol split off into different directions, creeping stealthily into the undergrowth.

Silverpaw could hear her own breathing amid the forest's eerie quiet. She slipped through the barren foliage, forcing her paws a delicate placement. Her fur snagged on prickly brambles and branches, but she pressed forth, silently bracing against pinpricks of pain as strands of hair broke free from her pelt.

She breathed in the sickly smell of the other Clan. Her heart thundered in her ears. She was growing closer.

With carefully placed steps, Silverpaw glided across the needle-strewn floor. Her ears strained for sound, and at last, the barest whisper of words touched the tufts of her ears. She froze, tilting her head. Their voices were vaguely familiar, but not familiar enough. *ShadowClan.*

Placing their direction, she brushed some twigs aside, narrowing her eyes as her assumption was confirmed. Just beyond the thicket, a group of five ShadowClan cats nestled within the foliage of RiverClan's territory. Among them was Mossrunner—ShadowClan's young deputy.

Silverpaw held her breath as she watched the enemy patrol speak amongst themselves.

"Didn't Trance say—"

Mossrunner whipped around with a snarl, "Cloudstar doesn't give a rat's tail what Trance says!" His eyes softened as he stared at the reddish she-cat, and he leaned forward, brushing his cheek against hers. "Our queens need more prey. You know this more than anyone."

The warrior hesitated. "All right. But if he..."

"Hush about him already," Mossrunner urged. "He's just a rogue. It's not like he can do anything."

Silverpaw's heart skipped a beat.

The she-cat huffed a soft laugh, though she looked unconvinced. "Yeah. You're right. When do we start, then?" She indicated to the depths of RiverClan land with a toss of her head.

"Whenever *you* decide to stop asking questions," a black she-cat retorted.

"That's enough, Beetlemask," Mossrunner grunted. "We wait for just a while longer, then we strike."

Her thoughts slowly spinning, Silverpaw began to back off. *Why did they mention rogues? Is he talking about the same rogues I know of?* She shivered, pushing the thought away. That wasn't the topic of concern; clearly, these cats were planning an attack, and soon.

She needed to find Sorrelmouse and report the news back to her.

As she took a careful step backwards, her fur snagged on a twig. The bush rustled noisily.

Silverpaw froze.

Her eyes darted back to the ShadowClan patrol, hidden behind a tangle of branches. All had gone silent. Her mouth suddenly felt parched, and her pelt prickled uneasily.

"Did you hear that?" One of the ShadowClan warriors hissed, his voice sending shivers clawing down Silverpaw's spine.

She peeked through the branches. The sleek, russet warrior was testing the air just within her line of sight. The red she-cat's fur was slick, and her body much slimmer than her Clanmates. Silverpaw took a self-conscious step back. The branches responded with a noisy shudder, and the ShadowClan warrior's amber eyes flashed towards her.

"I smell a RiverClan apprentice," she mewed coolly, her sharp eyes examining the foliage where Silverpaw was hidden. By some miracle, her eyes flickered straight past the silver she-cat. "I think she's alone."

Mossrunner snarled hastily, "Then find her! We can't let this be ruined by some nosy apprentice."

The warrior nodded curtly, and in an instant, the group of cats all rose to their paws. They fell into a terrifying, synchronized crouch, their steps so silent it was as though they were merely shadows. ShadowClan's stealth was infinitely unmatched—and these warriors were headed straight towards Silverpaw.

She jolted and scrambled to get away. Her fur caught and tangled in the branches, and in her desperate fight to break free, the bush clamored in her presence. The enemy warriors honed in on her, rapidly closing in. With her heart pulsing in her throat, Silverpaw finally wrenched herself free and bolted.

Paws thundered against the earth only a rabbit-length away. She could feel hot breath from the enemy cats on her heels, and her ears picked up the sharp crack of snapping teeth. Her legs were shorter than a fully grown warrior, and despair blurred her mind as the ShadowClan cats quickly gained ground.

Teeth nipped the tip of her tail, and Silverpaw yelped, tucking it between her haunches. She darted abruptly to the left, diving under a bush and sliding across the soil. She burst to the other side, gasping for breath, not daring to break her stride.

As she fled, fear swallowing every inch of her body, a familiar voice split the air, "*RiverClan, attack!*"

Sorrelmouse leaped from the underbrush right before the apprentice. She cast a sideways grin towards Silverpaw, not pausing for even a moment as she found herself in a vicious tussle with Mossrunner. Behind her emerged the rest of the RiverClan patrol—each with glittering eyes, yearning for battle.

The sight was thrilling, but only for an instant. As the scene dawned on her, Silverpaw could feel brambles creeping beneath her skin, winding painfully around her bones. Her breath caught in her chest. She couldn't even move a muscle.

The warriors fought with fervor, their teeth bared and claws unsheathed. Blood scattered across the sky, the crimson liquid bringing her heart to a stuttering halt, flashing her mind back to that terrible, terrible night.

Mossrunner's claws ripped through the air with a trail of scarlet droplets, and in his place, she could nearly see the scarred rogue tom, grinning in the cruel thrill.

"Silverpaw, what are you doing?" Sorrelmouse shouted.

The warrior lunged, latching her teeth around Mossrunner's scruff. She tossed him to the side like he was merely a piece of prey. The tom crashed to the ground with a grunt, and he clambered swiftly back to his paws. He launched at Sorrelmouse, raking at her side. Sorrelmouse whirled after him with a glancing swipe to his shoulder, her golden eyes drowning in unquenchably fury.

"Get your tail out here and fight!" Sorrelmouse shouted through gritted teeth, barely dodging another blow. "Use your training, Silverpaw!"

Silverpaw shook herself out of her frozen state. Though her heart scampered against her chest, she pushed her nightmares down into the deepest crevices of her mind and flung herself into the thick of battle.

Bodies writhed around her. All members of her patrol were already engaged with an enemy. Her eyes darted everywhere. *What do I do? What* can *I do?* Her throat was thick with emotion; she was

only an apprentice!

Then, she spotted a large ginger tabby, leisurely creeping towards Paledusk. The pale warrior was savagely battering a brown patched she-cat, oblivious to the eyes on his back. Fueled by adrenaline, Silverpaw gathered her courage and leaped to intercept the ShadowClan tom.

Silverpaw grappled onto his back, and the tom bellowed in rage, whirling around so quickly that she fell to the ground. She gasped, winded, and barely managed to find her feet in time to dodge his crushing paws.

Quick as a snake, she slashed her claws across his face, leaving four bloody furrows across his muzzle. The tom snarled in pain, his lip curling back to reveal four wickedly long fangs. *Gingerfang.* She recognized him from a past Gathering.

The ShadowClan warrior lunged at the smaller RiverClan she-cat, and Silverpaw yelped as he tackled her to the ground, sinking his long teeth painfully into her shoulder. She cried out, kicking at his belly and legs. She squirmed away, her heart thundering with fear.

The two faced each other again. Silverpaw darted forward, latching her foreclaws into his side, using her momentum to whip her hindlegs around. She grappled her hind claws into his pelt, digging all four sets of claws into his flesh, clinging to him like a squirrel on a tree.

She twisted her head, burying her teeth deep into the back of Gingerfang's neck.

The large warrior snarled ferociously, bucking and swaying in a futile attempt to dislodge the she-cat. Her claws dug more fiercely, more out of fear of falling than of earnest, her chest rattling in a continuous hiss.

Suddenly, Gingerfang rammed Silverpaw into a tree. She wheezed as the breath fled her body, her grip crumpling. She fell to the ground, and before her mind could stop spinning, Gingerfang had his claws skillfully pressed against her skull. She was pinned.

"Those are some nasty scars for a *kit*," the warrior hissed gravely, digging his claws deeper into her head. "How big was the fish? Long as my claws, you think?"

Silverpaw barely registered the offending words as she squirmed. Panic shrouded her mind, shadows dancing across her vision. Trickles of blood whittled into her eye, but she couldn't even see it.

The only thing she could see were the horrors of Owlpaw's death.

She was trapped. Helpless. As useless as a spoiled kittypet.

As blades of dry grass and needles tickled her nose, a soft, familiar fragrance greeted her. It was astoundingly fresh, the smell that haunted her every memory and dream. *Owlpaw?* She mouthed his name, confusion blurring the lines of reality. His scent wreathed around her, whispering comfort instead of upset into her heart.

As quickly as it had come, it was gone.

Calmness stilled Silverapw's erratic breathing, and she lay motionless on the ground. Whether his scent was a figment of her imagination, she wasn't sure, but it had been there. *Maybe I was useless in the past... but this could be my chance to prove myself.* Her breathing hitched. Gathering her muscles beneath her, she burst upwards in a sudden explosion of courage. She staggered Gingerfang's iron grip just enough to free herself.

The apprentice bounded a tail-length away, pain thundering in her skull. She ignored it and spun back around to face the tom yet again, her spine arched and hackles raised. Blood trickled down her face in a steady stream, lacing her bared teeth. Though she knew she would never be capable of beating Gingerfang, she knew she had to at least try. If not for herself, but for Owlpaw. *To prove that his death was not in vain.*

"This is RiverClan land!" She shrieked, flinging herself at the tom.

She flicked out her claws and slashed them across his ears. A savage *shriiip* split the air as flesh tore free, a chunk of his ear flying to the forest floor. Silverpaw skittered backwards with a lash of her

tail, her eyes narrowed precariously as she studied the now-murderous enemy warrior's looming figure.

Gingerfang charged. Silverpaw dodged nimbly to the side, but a yelp snagged in her throat as the tom's massive teeth gripped her tail. She scrabbled at the ground as he dragged her back, agony jolting up her spine. He swung her to the side. She slammed against the ground with a shout, her muscles trembling. She forced herself to her paws, hardly moving quickly enough to dodge a catastrophic blow. The ground shook at the force of his paws.

Panting, Silverpaw faced him again. Though her body trembled in agony, she prepared for another attack.

Before she could, however, an anguished wail erupted through the sky. Silverpaw spun around.

"Evefrost!"

Sorrelmouse stood a tail-length away from the russet ShadowClan warrior. Both were bloodied and injured from the skirmish, but Sorrelmouse's expression trembled with grief. A sad smile twisted her face, and she took a hesitant step forward.

Evefrost pounced.

Claws gleamed wickedly in the air as the ShadowClan warrior, a cat Silverpaw now recognized as Sorrelmouse's long lost daughter, latched her claws around Sorrelmouse's neck. As the two fell to the ground in a tangle of red fur, her teeth closed around Sorrelmouse's throat, stretching and tearing in an unnatural, gruesome display as she yanked her head back.

Sorrelmouse's eyes widened, a tear rolling down her cheek. As her daughter skipped away, she staggered to her paws, but she couldn't carry her own weight.

Forgetting the large warrior behind her, a broken scream ripped from Silverpaw's lungs.

She sprinted forward as fast as she could, the world growing dizzyingly slow. She slipped beneath Sorrelmouse's collapsing body

to break her fall, guiding her gently to the needle-strewn floor. Her throat felt unbearably tight as fear constricted her body.

"Sorrelmouse," she gasped, nuzzling her mentor's fur. Tears sprang into her eyes, choking her ability to form words as she stared at Sorrelmouse's rapidly weakening body.

Blood scattered her pelt and oozed from her throat. StarClan, there was *so much blood.*

Silverpaw's breathing accelerated in a panic. What could she do? What was happening? Her legs crumpled and she pressed her nose desperately against Sorrelmouse's pelt. Her mind flashed back to Owlpaw's death. That was bloody, too... wasn't it? She felt bile rise in her throat. It choked her like the claws of a rogue. Slashing, slashing, and *slashing.*

Sorrelmouse shakily craned her neck to look Silverpaw in the eye. Her eyes glowed with warmth and love, despite the rapidly gathering fogginess that choked their golden depths.

"You fought so well today," she whispered hoarsely. With every breath she took, blood frothed at her lips. She leaned forward and gave Silverpaw a shaky lick on the cheek. "You have no idea just how proud I am."

"You can be proud later," Silverpaw gasped, brushing her nose against Sorrelmouse's muzzle.

The red warrior shivered, and the apprentice responded by lapping at her pelt in a futile attempt to offer comfort. After a few heartbeats of no result, helpless anger ensnared her body, and she stumbled to her feet. *This can't be in vain.* The thought bounced around her head, numbingly loud.

Sorrelmouse's glazed eyes followed her. She murmured a soft protest, but her voice faded into the background as Silverpaw turned to face Evefrost.

Red blurred her vision. Silverpaw flew at the russet warrior, her claws outstretched.

A body slammed into her side, knocking the breath out of her and sending her rolling across the earth. Her eyes flashed to the cat who had her pinned, rage feuling her body as she kicked at their belly, her claws extended to their fullest.

"Silverpaw, stop!" Nosefleck snarled, twisting her body out of the apprentice's reach. "Get a hold of yourself, for StarClan's sake! The battle is lost."

"Let me go!"

"Only if you do nothing rash," Nosefleck hissed scathingly, relinquishing her hold on the apprentice.

She blocked Silverpaw's path to the ShadowClan warriors, and the silver apprentice snarled, her eyes hot with tears as she peered past her.

Dappledfang stood, his lips curled in a snarl as he faced his daughter. "What have you done?" He hissed.

Evefrost lifted her head and met Dappledfang's matching amber eyes. Her expression wavered, but she quickly set her face and stood tall. "I've proven my loyalty to my Clan," she stated firmly. "This is ShadowClan territory now."

"But RiverClan is your home," Dappledfang protested feebly.

"Not anymore. Not when ShadowClan cared for me when you could not," Evefrost growled. "Leave before you face more casualties. This is our land."

The two faced each other. For a heartbeat, Silverpaw thought Dappledfang would rip his daughter's pelt off, but with one last hiss, he spun around and raced back to Sorrelmouse's side. The tom sank to his haunches, showering his mate in affectionate licks.

"It's going to be okay," he mewed urgently, lapping between her ears. "You'll be okay, my love. Just keep your eyes open."

"Oh, Dappledfang..." Sorrelmouse's voice was so weak, Silverpaw could hardly hear it. "Of course I'll be fine. I could never leave you

alone."

Silverpaw trembled as she saw the tiny smile cresting her mentor's mouth, even with so much blood frothing around it. Dappledfang let out a low, distressed moan, sinking his muzzle deeper into Sorrelmouse's fur. "You'd better not," he sobbed.

"Silverpaw." Silverpaw turned to see Paledusk watching her, his expression dark. "Go back to camp and fetch Wishfern."

"W-Wishfern?" She could hardly process his words.

Dappledfang lifted his tear-stained eyes. "Yes!" He shouted, his voice so shrill that Silverpaw crouched away in fright. "Get her now, please!"

Silverpaw's paws turned to mush as she stared at Sorrelmouse and Dappledfang. She couldn't move. How could they expect her to run again?

Dappledfang lurched to his paws, viciously cuffing her around the ears. "Go now, you useless apprentice!" He shrieked. "She's dying!"

Feeling sprang back to her paws, and she gave herself a violent shake, stumbling backwards. She glanced at her mentor one final time, horror seizing her body.

"Okay," she gasped. "Okay!"

Her paws fumbled against the ground. She spun around, pelting back to camp as fast as her paws could carry her, Dappledfang's final words ringing in her ears to the beat of her heart.

"She's dying!"

Chapter Ten

[image]

A golden ray of sunshine trickled into the RiverClan camp, shining brilliantly through wisps of fog. The first cracks of dawn introduced warmth to the chilly morning, eating away at frost-gathered grass.

Cats emerged from their dens as they prepared for the new day, while Silverpaw sat, already present, in the center of the clearing.

Her light paws were tucked under her stomach, and her nose remained pressed against soft, red fur. Her fur was bushed out, fighting to keep warm under the cool air. She inhaled deeply, knowing that one of these breaths would be the last time she'd ever smell her mentor's scent.

"You were an honored warrior of RiverClan, Sorrelmouse. A mother, a friend, a mentor, and a mate; your ever-loving presence will forever be missed. May you find a safe passage to StarClan, where you will embrace a pleasant eternity with the sun warming your back and fish leaping into your paws," Wishfern finished solemnly, bowing her head to the red warrior's still body.

Sorrelmouse looked as though she were merely dozing. Her pelt was nicely groomed, as it always was, and her nose was tucked lightly beneath her tail. The faint smell of watermint wafted from her body, disguising the undeniable stench of death. The wounds marring her fur were hidden as best as they could be. The injury on her neck, however, was still clearly visible. It was too large to be concealed like the rest, permanently dividing the warrior from what she was in life, and now in death.

Silverpaw backed away, sadness hardening her throat like dry bark as the Clan's three elders carefully lifted her mentor's body and hauled her out of camp. As her golden eyes trailed the limp red figure, she could feel numbness spreading from her chest to the very tip of her tail.

Denial surged through her—*She can't be gone, this has to be a dream,* but regardless of how hard she fought against the intrusive thoughts of reality, she simply couldn't. And that only hurt worse.

Throughout the night, Silverpaw had only been accompanied by Dappledfang. The rest of the Clan had retreated to their nests long before moonhigh, leaving the two alone. The tom's grief was as clear as a full moon on a cloudless night, and he dared not spare a single glance to Silverpaw through his tears. She knew, deep down, that he blamed her for Sorrelmouse's death.

As he should, she thought sadly. *It really is my fault. If I'd left sooner... if I'd run quicker... she might still be here.* She shuddered, snatching her eyes away from the camp entrance.

With Wishfern and Pinestar on her tail, she had raced back to the border as fast as possible, only to be greeted by Dappledfang's mournful howling as he laid, hunched over his mate's unmoving body.

Silverpaw was by his side in an instant; simply staring at Sorrelmouse's rapidly cooling corpse in a pool of her own blood.

It was absurd to her how quickly a life could be snuffed. Her mentor; the cat who had taken her in as a daughter, had been stripped away in a single battle—just like Owlpaw. And neither had survived due to Silverpaw's negligence.

Out of the corner of her eye, Silverpaw caught a flicker of brown fur through the hazy clearing. She dazedly turned her head to see Pinestar creeping out from between the roots of the ancient willow tree, his eyes gaunt with grief, but his form set with the imperturbability of a leader.

He lifted his head and yowled, "May all cats old enough to swim in the rapids gather around for a Clan meeting!"

The tom gathered his haunches and sprang atop a large, mossy boulder. His claws dug into the slick moss before he steadied himself, turning to face the swiftly gathering Clan.

Sleep-leaden warriors assembled in a ragged half-circle around the boulder. Silverpaw remained where she was, already in perfect view of the leader. Soft chatter shrouded the air as tired warriors discussed the possibilities of their leader's summons.

"Where's Dappledfang run off to?"

"Let it be, Swimleap. The poor thing lost his kits, apprentice, *and* his mate in less than a season-cycle."

"Maybe Pinestar's finally giving me an apprentice!"

"I highly doubt it."

"Don't be a fish-brain. Silverpaw is in need of a new mentor, and it's not going to be anybody as insensitive as you."

Silverpaw tuned out the voices and folded her ears against her head.

Suddenly, a body slammed into her side. She winced, her cobwebbed injuries pulsing with pain as she turned to see Mistpaw pressing up next to her. She froze at the black apprentice's sorrow-filled eyes.

"What are you doing?" Silverpaw blurted.

"Having your back, that's what!" Mistpaw straightened, her green eyes glowing.

Silverpaw's shoulders prickled, and she struggled to speak. "I don't need you to have my back," she croaked, turning her eyes away from the she-cat. She started as two more black figures fell into place beside her.

"Nobody can deal with something like this on their own," Toadpaw mewed sympathetically, running his tail along her spine.

Lichenpaw smiled. Though she remained silent, her blue eyes glowed in encouragement.

"Maybe you guys can't," Silverpaw retorted, "but I can."

Mistpaw cuffed Silverpaw over the ears. "You can't keep shutting us out whenever there's a tragedy," she snapped.

"Yes, I can!" Silverpaw yowled back. "I can't get too close to you guys. If I do..." she hesitated. She knew she sounded irrational, but it had happened far too often to be false. *I've lost all the cats closest to me in my life—I can't bear to lose anymore.* "You might leave me, too," her voice shook.

"By pushing us away, you're already losing us. It's either you be our friend, or not at all. We're here to help you through the tough times, to be there for you when you need us, but we can't if you just keep discarding us like crowfood." Mistpaw padded around Silverpaw until she could meet the tabby's eyes. "Come on, Silverpaw," she pleaded. "Let us stay by your side."

Silverpaw's mouth bobbed. "I—" she swallowed. She felt the eyes of her Clanmates burning holes into the back of her neck, and she hunched even lower to the ground. "Okay, fine," she muttered. "I guess I could use your company."

Mistpaw nodded curtly. "Good." She wound around the silver tabby one more time, squeezing between Lichenpaw so she could press next to Silverpaw. "You're not alone, Silverpaw," she reassured, lapping her friend's ear.

She struggled to relax under the presence of her friends, her eyes darting between the three of them, torn between acceptance and pushing them away.

The eyes of the Clan once more shifted up to Pinestar. The leader, his brows raised, spoke again, "As many of you are aware, we have been struck by the loss of a valuable warrior. Sorrelmouse now walks among the stars, and in her absence, Silverpaw is left without a mentor."

Silverpaw shrank under her pelt. Pity and irritation swam through the air as her Clanmates muttered amongst themselves about her. Lionpoppy's eyes found her in the crowd, narrowing sharply before she turned to whisper venom-laced words to Quietoak.

"Honeywhisker," Pinestar's voice scored through the air, "I expect you to handle Silverpaw's training from this point onward. Salmonskip trained you well, and I anticipate the same from you."

From the other side of the clearing, the golden warrior politely dipped his head. "Thank you, Pinestar," he meowed. "I'll do my best."

Honeywhisker rose to his paws and padded steadily across the clearing. Silverpaw watched him until he stood before her, his amber eyes narrowed as he studied the silver tabby.

With a dissatisfied sigh, the tom leaned forward and pressed his nose to hers—the two were nearly the same height, separated by only a few moons in age. Silverpaw refrained from letting her scarred muzzle crinkle unhappily.

"I expect you to behave like a warrior, not a mouse, during your training with me," Honeywhisker hissed softly as he pulled away.

A nearly inaudible growl rolled from Silverpaw's chest as she watched the unbearable tom walk away. She held her anger between gritted teeth, and her growl smoothed into a rattly breath as she calmed herself.

Bristling fur tickled her side, and she quickly realized that Mistpaw's own eyes were narrowed in a furious glare. She pressed herself against the black she-cat's flank in return, and gradually, Mistpaw relaxed, but not without a scowl.

"Next, we have two new apprentices to appoint. Finchkit and Pigeonkit, please step forward."

Silverpaw felt a brief stir of surprise at the mention of the excitable kits' names, and she watched as the two squealed with delight. Pigeonkit, his fur messy and unkempt, tumbled along a few tail-lengths behind his more immaculate sister, the both of them barreling across the earth. Quietoak lunged forward and snagged Pigeonkit by the scruff, dragging him back to her paws to give him a swift grooming.

Pigeonkit squeaked and fought to escape his mother as she rapidly licked his fur smooth. At last, she set him free, watching with warm eyes as the gray tabby joined his sister beneath the large boulder.

Salmonskip, from the base of the meeting-place, studied the two with quiet pride.

"Finchkit and Pigeonkit," Pinestar continued, his eyes shining in amusement, "you have both reached the age of six moons, and it is time for your apprenticeship to begin. From this day onward, until you receive your warrior names, you will be known as Finchpaw and Pigeonpaw. Finchpaw, your mentor will be Heatfur, and Pigeonpaw, your mentor will be Lionpoppy. You have both shown excellent loyalty and skill as warriors, and I expect you to pass your knowledge on to the future of our Clan. Train these apprentices to their fullest potential."

Silverpaw's eyes narrowed as she watched Lionpoppy approach young Pigeonpaw. The gray tabby squirmed excitedly, and he eagerly touched his nose to Lionpoppy's. Her eyes were soft, and a light smile danced across her muzzle.

Once Heatfur greeted her own apprentice, the Clan erupted into cheers, swarming to congratulate the newly appointed apprentices.

"Finchpaw! Pigeonpaw! Finchpaw! Pigeonpaw!"

Silverpaw joined the cacophony of voices, smiling slightly as she watched the apprentices nearly leap out of their pelts in joy. Her heart twisted as she recalled her own apprentice ceremony—her *real* one. She and Owlpaw had been nearly as excited, her mother had been proud, and Sorrelmouse's brilliant smile had lit up the rainy day. Her smile faltered. *If only I could go back in time.*

"The Clan is dismissed," Pinestar declared, sweeping his white-tipped tail around him.

The tom leaped down from his perch, summoning Salmonskip away from his kits with a brisk gesture. The deputy glanced at the apprentices one final time before ducking into conversation with

Pinestar, the two sweeping towards the base of the overarching willow.

"Are you all right?" Toadpaw inquired softly, brushing his tail along Silverpaw's side.

"Just fine," Silverpaw mewed.

Mistpaw scoffed, shouldering the silver tabby, "*Sure* you are."

"Please stop that," Silverpaw mewed, pulling away from her friend and shifting her aching shoulders.

"Oh, sorry. But as I was saying, there's *no way* you're fine! Not with Honeywhisker as your mentor." She shuddered. "I can't believe Pinestar actually assigned that fox-heart to finish your training."

"Yeah, well, it happened. At least I won't be stuck with him for my entire apprenticeship... I'll be a warrior soon enough."

"You shouldn't have to be stuck with him at all! He's hardly more than a warrior himself."

Silverpaw grunted in agreement. *If I hadn't gotten Sorrelmouse killed, I wouldn't need to be stuck with him in the first place.*

"Silverpaw."

She jerked her head up, suddenly weary as she saw Honeywhisker scowling at her, only a few whisker-lengths away. "What is it?" She snapped, drawing back her lips to bare her teeth.

Honeywhisker's ears twitched in annoyance, and he snarled back at her, "Salmonskip requested that you take today off. Go get some rest, we'll be training tomorrow."

Silverpaw's eyes narrowed to slits, and she turned her head away, responding with an unsatisfactory grunt.

Honeywhisker opened his mouth, but thought better of whatever he had to say and instead huffed, turning away. He hurried to the camp entrance where Aspentail and Wolfpounce impatiently

waited.

"Did you stay up all night?" Toadpaw prodded once Silverpaw's new mentor was gone.

"Of course I did," she murmured, still staring at the camp entrance. "I didn't want to miss the last chance I had to spend with Sorrelmouse, like I did with Owlpaw."

She closed her eyes at the thought. She had been too injured to attend her brother's vigil; instead, her final memory of him was full of terror as the life fled his body.

At least Sorrelmouse looked as if she were merely sleeping.

"I'm sorry," Mistpaw mewed gently.

Silverpaw gave herself a brisk shake, pushing down her aching sadness. "Let's get something to eat," she said instead, brushing away from Mistpaw as the black apprentice tried to comfort her. "I'm... starving." She flicked her tail. Though it was true, she really didn't want to eat anything. Her appetite had been numbed by a torrent of loss.

"I've already beat you to it," Lichenpaw mewed over her shoulder. She was dragging a massive large-mouthed bass from the fresh-kill pile, her ears slightly drawn back.

"Brilliant," Toadpaw purred. "I knew we could count on you, Lichenpaw!" He hurried over to help her pull it over.

Silverpaw joined the two, and the three of them pulled it beneath some shrubbery. As the rest of her companions chowed down, Silverpaw found herself simply staring at the scaly green flesh. Finally, she grimaced and took a small bite. It tasted like gravel, struggling to slide down her gullet.

"How did anybody manage to catch this?" Mistpaw mumbled around a mouthful of meat. "It's huge!"

Silverpaw shrugged, picking halfheartedly at its flesh. After a few more bites, she couldn't bear to eat anymore. It felt like she was

licking toadskin.

"That's enough for me." She stood back to wipe her whiskers clean. "Thank you for sharing."

"Are you sure that's enough?" Lichenpaw mewed quietly, her blue eyes light with concern.

"Yeah."

Mistpaw paused in her eating. "Well, thank you for joining us. I know things are hard right now... but you can always talk with us, all right?" She beamed. "No matter what."

Silverpaw forced a smile. "Yeah. Thanks, Mistpaw."

Lichenpaw gingerly stretched her neck forward, but Silverpaw flinched away.

Mistpaw gently swatted her sister over the head, and the two exchanged a glance. Silverpaw could see an entire conversation pass between them through just their eyes. Her heart wrenched.

Lichenpaw's blue gaze, wide with sympathy, stared at Silverpaw for a moment longer. She nodded a wordless farewell.

Flicking her tail, Silverpaw padded away, exhaustion weighing at her paws. She was only moments away from the apprentice's den, both dreading and anticipating her nest, when Toadpaw skipped up beside her.

"What is it?" She mewed before he could speak.

"Are you sure you're okay?" He asked, his breath stirring her whiskers.

"Clearly not." She shrugged halfheartedly. "What do you expect of me? To get over it, just like that?" She wrenched a paw through the air for emphasis.

"I don't see why I'd ever think that. I just... is there any way I can help? Any way to make things easier for you?"

Silverpaw returned his intense stare, her heart throbbing with sorrow. "No. Unless you can bring Sorrelmouse and Owlpaw back from the dead, there's nothing you can do for me." She dipped her head. "Thanks, anyways. Goodnight."

His shoulders slumped, illuminated by the early morning sun. "Sleep well, Silverpaw."

She spun around, retreating to the confines of the apprentice's den. The stale air and soft moss greeted her as she wove around the empty nests, until at last, she met her own. She stared at it for a brief moment, then to the empty space where Owlpaw's nest once was. Her heart churned. *It's gone.* Her nose quivered, stinging with an oncoming set of tears. Before they could break loose, she dropped into her bedding and tucked her nose beneath her tail.

Tears stained her fur as grief swallowed her, sweeping her away into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter Eleven

[image]

Silverpaw dug her paws deep into Lichenpaw's side, though her claws remained sheathed and harmless. She twisted her arms and threw the opposing apprentice to the ground, planting her paws firmly against the black and white she-cat's chest.

Lichenpaw hissed, kicking viciously at Silverpaw's belly, but to no avail. She was pinned.

"That's enough!" Nightpatch shouted, padding forward to separate the two apprentices. He blinked his green eyes approvingly at Silverpaw. "Well done, that was an excellent pin."

Silverpaw nearly warmed to the praise, but her victory was overshadowed by the absence of Sorrelmouse. It had only been a few sunrises since her death, and the pain of it was as fresh as ever. The amount of time it took her Clan to adapt to death was lost upon her. Was it really something so easily dismissed? To lose your loved ones, your friends? She recognized that their grief was still present, but it was pushed down and ignored, placed on the backburner of life as things moved forward; a behavior she couldn't understand.

She relinquished her hold on her opponent, flanks heaving and breathless. She watched as Lichenpaw dragged herself to her paws, her blue eyes flickering hopelessly.

"I never win," she muttered, hunching her shoulders.

Nightpatch flicked his tail along her side. "You don't need to win all the time to be a good warrior. You just need to fine tune your skills a bit more, and you'll be perfect."

"You've said that since day one!"

"I have not! On day one, your skills far outmatched your denmates."

Lichenpaw scoffed. "I wish it were still that way."

Honeywhisker strolled over, his eyes narrowed and scrutinizing. "She was just as bad then as she is now," he hissed scaldingly. "I beat her in every training session."

"That's because you were nearly a warrior already," Silverpaw snapped, turning to glare at the cat who should've never replaced her mentor. "You haven't improved even a whisker since you became a warrior. It's a miracle you passed your assessment in the first place!"

"You're no better either," Honeywhisker scoffed. "Let's go. We need to work on your rear claw-swipe." Without another word, the golden tom whisked around and stormed away.

Silverpaw lashed her tail, resentment bubbling inside of her. "Fox-heart," she muttered under her breath.

Nightpatch shook his head absently. "I know I shouldn't be saying this, but I still can't see why Pinestar made a warrior as young as him a mentor. He lacks the maturity to train you properly. No matter," he continued briskly, "you'd best run along now before you get in trouble. Lichenpaw, we'll practice one-on-one to try to find what precisely you're struggling with. Sound good?"

The dark she-cat silently nodded, her eyes low.

Silverpaw turned away from the two and chased after Honeywhisker, who had pushed through some shrubbery and emerged into a smaller clearing. Just through the trees beyond, she could see Mistpaw and Toadpaw training together, rolling around in thinly layered grass while their mentors spectated.

"Rear claw-swipe. Demonstrate, now," Honeywhisker snapped, his tail flicking irritably behind him.

Gritting her teeth, Silverpaw stubbornly waited for a few moments, her chin tilted high to glare at the tom. Once she noticed the twitch in his cheek, a habit betraying his rising temper, she finally did as instructed. She reared to her hindquarters and struck the air with

both claws, her spine swaying as she maintained her balance. She imagined a mixture of faces on the receiving end. Honeywhisker, then Evefrost, and then... the rogue tom. She shuddered as she dropped to the ground, staring at her claws as they flexed against the earth.

"Terribly done," the golden tom snapped. "Rear up like this," he rose studiously to his haunches and clawed at the air, his tail flicking ever-so-slightly for balance. "And don't sway your whole body! Do you seriously think you'll land even a single blow if you keep moving without stability?" He dropped back to all fours, shooting a scowl through the trees towards Nightpatch, whose tail brushed lightly along Lichenpaw's spine as he helped her position herself in a different battle move. Through gritted teeth, Honeywhisker added, "I don't know how that old tom thinks you did any better than a crippled rabbit." His eyes shot back over. "Go on already, show me what you can do!"

Huffing in annoyance, Silverpaw reared onto her hindquarters yet again, swiping as if she were in the thick of battle. Once satisfied with her own efforts, keeping her body more stable this time, she let her paws fall back to the earth, proudly flicking her whiskers.

"You're not standing tall enough. Do it again!"

Silverpaw gawked at the tom. *Stand taller? For StarClan's sake, I'll become a twoleg if I manage any more height!* Biting back a snarl, she repeated her actions. This time, she arched her spine so far that she nearly toppled over, but with brisk flicks of her tail, she kept her balance as she deftly batted her paws.

Her mind flickered back to Sorrelmouse—*she told me I'd perfected this move. And if I really* am *doing it so poorly, she would've been much more helpful.* She gritted her teeth at the memory of Sorrelmouse's gentle criticism. She'd always reposition the apprentice with both words and her paws, noting what was done well and what could be improved on. But not once did she yell at her, and not once did she scold her for how poorly she performed.

Silverpaw finished her demonstration, screwing up her face into a scowl. "Did I do it this time?" She spat, quickly smoothing her

ruffled fur.

Honeywhisker's nose quivered. "Sure. Fine. You did well enough. Let's see if any of the other apprentices want to fight you—Toadpaw or Mistpaw are bound to be at least *somewhat* competent."

The tom marched away, and with a roll of her eyes, Silverpaw hurried after him.

The colorful leaves that decorated the forest canopy fluttered flimsily as a brisk wind whisked through, and the two cats trudged through a short stretch of trees until they appeared at the outskirts of a small, dusty clearing. It was bordered by a wall of holly bushes, and a small pond crested at the far edge, fed by a bubbling creek. Silverpaw could see little flickers of silver scales, and occasionally, bright orange as fish wove in and out of the pond.

According to the elders, the orange fish—titled goldfish—had once never been there and were bursting in population. They could become quite fat, and were rapidly overtaking the river, as they were surprisingly elusive for their bright coloration. Silverpaw sniffed. Though they fed the Clan well, she couldn't begin to imagine being stuck to eating only one flavor of fish for the rest of her days. She'd rather eat squirrels!

Her attention was drawn to the center of the clearing as Mistpaw caterwauled. Toadpaw cuffed his sister around the ears and sprang. Mistpaw met him midair, her lip curled in a snarl, and in an instant the littermates fell into a writhing mess on the floor until one black figure stood proudly on top. Toadpaw's face was smushed to the earth, and he breathed sharply as dust swirled around him.

"Victory!" Mistpaw crowed, her eyes gleaming with mirth as she freed her brother.

"Excellent job, Mistpaw," Minnowstripe praised from the outskirts of the clearing.

Crowspots, from beside the tortoiseshell warrior, politely nodded her head. "Well done indeed, both of you," she rasped. "Come with me now, Toadpaw. I'll show you a few more dodging techniques

that will guarantee your victory next time." Her brown eyes glittered mischievously.

"Great!" Toadpaw eagerly chased after the old gray she-cat, his tail high over his spine. As he passed Silverpaw, he shot her a reassuring smile.

"Looks like we'll have to plan some moves to stop that," Minnowstripe teased Mistpaw, who nodded excitedly in return. The tortoiseshell turned her attention to the new arrivals, flicking her tail towards Silverpaw. "Is she ready to fight?"

Honeywhisker snorted. "*As if*, but let's get started anyways."

"Right then..." Minnowstripe rolled her shoulders, as if shrugging away the tom's brisk tone, and retrieved two stones. She placed them in the center of the clearing, spaced just a few tail-lengths away from each other before she joined Honeywhisker back at the bordering holly. "Both of you, stand at one of the stones. Begin a mock battle when I tell you to."

Obediently, Silverpaw padded forward and selected the stone furthest from Honeywhisker. Mistpaw stood directly across from her, her claws flexing eagerly while her eyes flickered back and forth between her mentor and Silverpaw.

"Begin in three..."

Silverpaw dropped to a crouch, her eyes narrowed to slits as she studied her friend—now a faux foe.

"...Two..."

Mistpaw's lips curled back into a mix between a snarl and a grin. Her tail began to lash.

"...One. Begin!"

A sliver of panic weaseled into the corners of Silverpaw's mind, threatening to cloud her thoughts in the split second of pain-staking stillness. She struggled to push it down. *It's only Mistpaw. There will be no bloodshed today.*

The moment was gone as the apprentices launched forward at the same time, meeting each other midair. Their paws battered at each other's faces, and in sync, they danced away from the other, their eyes a blaze of energy.

Silverpaw lunged again, carving her paw across Mistpaw's flank. She made diligent care to keep her claws sheathed. Once the blow landed, she skipped backwards, keeping her body twisted out of reach as she slid around to face her friend again.

With a yowl, Mistpaw leaped, her paws outstretched. Silverpaw hesitated, but managed to slide beneath the black she-cat's soaring figure, and as she attempted to twist herself midair, Silverpaw arched her back, bumping her spine against Mistpaw's belly. Her momentum disrupted, Mistpaw tumbled to the ground with a grunt.

Lashing her tail, Silverpaw pounced and sank her paws deep into Mistpaw's fur. She contorted herself to pin the black apprentice, a breathless grin stirring her features as Mistpaw fell limp. She lifted her head, searching for Minnowstripe's approving gaze, but without warning, Mistpaw surged upwards in an explosion of strength.

Silverpaw rolled to the ground with a startled yowl, and before she could find her footing, Mistpaw flipped around and charged. Silverpaw squirmed as she was tackled to the leaf-scattered floor, dust flying around them. Her paws battered at Mistpaw's stomach. *She's stronger than I remember,* she realized in alarm, pushing with all of her might. Her struggles faltered as she realized she was effectively pinned.

Turning her head away, Silverpaw heaved a reluctant sigh. "You win," she breathed, squeezing her eyes shut against the stinging cloud of dust.

Mistpaw released her grip and backed away, her green eyes shining. "Good fight," she mewed breathlessly.

Silverpaw quickly rose back to her paws, unwilling to remain on the ground for a moment longer, and gave her ruffled fur a few brisk licks to clean away the lingering filth. "Yeah, good fight," she mewed, flicking away a dead leaf alongside her churning thoughts.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Honeywhisker scowling in disapproval. She flattened her ears. Minnowstripe spotted Honeywhisker's sour look and gave him a quick thwack over the head with her tail. His amber-eyed glare turned towards her.

"What?" Minnowstripe hissed. "Cut the attitude already, they both did fine."

Honeywhisker bristled. "That's *my* apprentice you're talking about. *I* say when she did fine or not."

Minnowstripe gave an exaggerated roll of her eyes before returning her attention to the two apprentices. Her tail idly flicked against Honeywhisker's side, and she strode into the clearing.

"You both fought well, but you have room for improvement." She glanced between them. "Silverpaw, you need to keep your guard up. Never think you've won a battle just because your opponent is pinned. Give them a good beating. Another thing I noticed is your lack of awareness; just because you're in a fight doesn't mean nothing is going on around you. You can easily be snuck up on and lose the battle in that manner."

Silverpaw nodded slowly, shame swimming through her. *I should've known that already.*

Minnowstripe, oblivious to the troubles spinning in the apprentice's thoughts, turned her green eyes to Mistpaw. "You, on the other paw, need to think ahead. How will your attacks be countered, and what can you do to deflect that? You saw how Silverpaw predicted your leap-and-pin, and she did an excellent job in reacting correspondingly. One suggestion I have, while you're still working on learning how to anticipate the enemy, is to behave unpredictably. If you confuse your opponent, they can't think of a counter. And certainly don't stick to the same routine." The warrior stepped back with a proud smile. "Again, you both are shaping up to be great warriors."

Honeywhisker snorted. Minnowstripe's head whipped around in his direction, just as the tom covered his derisive grin with a paw. The tortoiseshell warrior frowned.

"Well, let's try another round," Minnowstripe declared, giving her fur a disgruntled shake. She returned to Honeywhisker's side.

Silverpaw quickly presumed her position at her designated stone, dropping to a crouch. The apprentices stared at each other, patiently awaiting the warrior's command.

"Begin!"

Unlike the last time, the two remained stationary, anticipating the other to make the first move. The apprentices stood at their stones, eyes narrowed and tails lashing.

Mistpaw crept an inch to the side. Her body hung low to the ground, and her belly nearly brushed against the dust. A rumbling growl thrummed in Silverpaw's chest as she carefully watched her friend; a fitful attempt to hide her anxieties. The clearing was silent —all except for the two apprentices, waiting for chaos to break.

Her lips drawn in a soundless snarl, Mistpaw lunged. Dust sprayed around her quick-moving paws.

Silverpaw squared her shoulders and lowered her head to face Mistpaw's tackle head on, but to her surprise, Mistpaw adjusted her trajectory. Using her momentum to bounce off the ground, she leaped straight onto Silverpaw's back. Silverpaw yelped and scrambled to throw her friend off, dropping quickly and rolling on the ground. Mistpaw jumped away before she could be crushed, and as Silverpaw rose to her paws, the black apprentice dove between the tabby's sprawled legs. Silverpaw yelped, the barest touch of fur brushing her chest. She leaped away before her friend could complete the devastating move.

She whirled around to face Mistpaw again, only to see the black she-cat already charging. Silverpaw was hardly capable of reacting in time, ungracefully rearing to her hindlegs and swatting her denmate away with a flurry of paw-swipes. As her friend backed away, she simpered. Clearly, she was capable of a rear claw-swipe.

Eat that, Honeywhisker!

She dropped back to all fours and darted forward, snapping her teeth around thin air as Mistpaw dodged. Then, Silverpaw feigned to the right. Mistpaw moved to counter her, but Silverpaw turned to the left with a confident twist at the very last second, thrusting with all of her might into Mistpaw's side.

Mistpaw lost her balance and flailed to the ground. She kicked out her paws as Silverpaw launched on top of her, and they scrambled for a hold, rolling around on the ground. Dust flew around them and stung at Silverpaw's eyes, nearly suffocating her in its intensity. Her heart thundered as her back slammed against the earth, a paw snaking to her throat and pressing down forcefully.

Silverpaw fell limp, her eyes a burning fire until Mistpaw finally freed her. The black she-cat twisted around to give her pelt a quick lick—it was devastated from their scuffle, completely unkempt and sticking up in mats.

Minnowstripe's gaze was thoughtful. "Let's try that again."

The two sparred once more. Silverpaw found herself pinned face-first in the earth, dirt scrunching against her muzzle and itching at her nostrils. "I surrender!" She cried, nearly choking on soil.

At her words, Mistpaw released her, stumbling back, flanks heaving. As she studied the silver tabby, her green eyes shone with an emotion Silverpaw knew far too well. *Pity.* She looked away, biting back a frustrated snarl.

The apprentices sparred again, then again, and again. Silverpaw won a handful of times out of their numerous battles, improvement gradually showing throughout their performance as she relearned her forgotten techniques, but the few victories did little for her confidence. Hopelessness spiraled in her heart. How could she expect to do anything right if she couldn't even beat a fellow apprentice?

At last, their training came to a close. The shadows had grown long and the birdsong was fading, now replaced by the distant hooting of owls and chirps of crickets.

Honeywhisker's eyes shone with disappointment as the group began the trek back to camp. Mistpaw tried feebly to start a conversation with Silverpaw, but the tabby couldn't gather the courage to allow their words to last, her tail dragging in the dirt.

Once they reached the camp, Mistpaw went off to find company with Ravenfire and her littermates. Silverpaw fetched a piece of fresh-kill and picked absently at it in the shadows of a fern, hardly eating more than a few bites before night had fallen, draping the clearing in darkness. The sky was cloudy, leaving little starlight to shine down on them.

When all of her Clanmates had gone to sleep, Silverpaw slipped into the dirtplace. Her heart twisted in her throat as she approached the back of the den. She gently nudged the ferns, but they were firmly in place. *Somebody must've repaired it.* Carefully and quietly, she took her claws and sliced a flap open, just wide enough for her to wriggle through.

She did just that, emerging onto the slim riverbank, the fresh air greeting her.

Sadness gnawed at her belly as she padded along the edge of the river, barely hearing anything past the thumping of her heart in her ears. She could nearly see her brother ahead of her, sneaking along the reeds and cattails with confidence, oblivious to the tragedy that would soon wreak upon them. She swallowed her grief and pushed on, allowing the illusion to dissipate. She swam across the river before she could reach the crossing stones.

Sullenly, the apprentice padded through the territory. Though she'd only been there once, it was as though she'd been there hundreds of times before, finding the path as easily as the one to her nest. She stumbled upon the plain clearing and pushed through a screen of brambles, emerging onto the rocky outcropping. Sorrelmouse's cliff. Her whiskers trembled as she crept to the edge, struggling to hold back tears as she recalled Sorrelmouse's words of reassurance.

She breathed a shaky breath. "*I miss you,*" she whispered to oblivion, praying someone dear to her heart would hear it. In such a vast, open space, she nearly felt closer to StarClan, even if they were

separated by a layer of clouds.

She closed her eyes for a moment, allowing the soft breeze to stir her pelt and her tail to hang limp. Once she'd collected her composure, she began to train. Imaginary foes appeared before her mind's eye, lunging from all angles. Unlike the dream she'd had on the fateful night of Owlpaw's death, they went for the kill, and their movements were far more similar to the real thing. She moved her body in a dance between offense and defense, picking through her deepest struggles and trying her hardest to improve upon them.

Perhaps if she trained hard enough, she'd never lose a loved one again.

❀

Believe it or not, but this story is now as long as Frecklesky's Heart, and we're only on Chapter Eleven! Crazy how much of a difference longer chapters can make, right?

Onto some more exciting news... if you couldn't tell already, chapter updates have returned! I tried to write ahead a bit this time and have roughly 6 more chapters written, so hopefully the weekly upload schedule will remain consistent for a while.

Thank you guys so much again for your support and patience, and I'll see you next Friday! ~ Kitten

Chapter Twelve

[image]

Honeywhisker's amber eyes were slits as he watched Silverpaw. The apprentice was tense as they padded along behind Wolfpounce, marking the boundary vigilantly. Her muscles were sore and her eyes stung with tiredness from a long night of training alone, a habit she'd taken up since her failed training session with Mistpaw a few days ago. If she ever wanted to protect those around her, she needed to be strong enough to fight off a threat.

A strange sense of guilt wormed its way into her chest. Lichenpaw had mentioned Owlpaw sneaking out to train, and, in a way, she was copying him. But it wasn't her intention; she only wanted to be strong. If that meant training every night, that was exactly what she'd do.

Though some found it unnecessary, it was important to keep the border along the lake acutely marked—it was three tail-lengths away from the water's edge to allow travelers safe passage without infringing on another's territory. It was uncommonly traversed, especially on RiverClan's side of the lake, but it was best to keep the smells fresh. It showed an air of responsibility, and kept the other Clans from seeing them as weak if they ever decided to poke around.

It was a cloudy, windy morning. Sunrise had waned not long ago, but the shadows were still long amid the clouds for the early day. The smell of fresh rain pervaded her nostrils. The gray haze was still visible on the horizon, leftovers from the previous day's storm, but the wind carried the smell of more to come. The breeze was chilly, chasing away any warmth and instead biting into her pelt. In return, her fur was fluffed out. It did little to negate the chill, but such efforts were better than nothing. Silverpaw simply couldn't wait to return to the veil of trees, which had entirely lost their leaf-cover.

Spotting a bare shrub growing along the shoreline, Silverpaw

scraped her cheek along the branches, before racing to catch up to Wolfpounce's brisk pace. The tom always seemed intimidating, but was peaceful contrary to his gruff appearance. Patrols with him were always quiet ones, as he preferred not to speak on trivial matters.

"What's that?" Honeywhisker mewed suddenly. Silverpaw glanced back at him, then ahead as she followed his gaze.

Interestingly, a cat was walking along the lakeshore, a limp to their step.

"Clearly, somebody's headed our way," Wolfpounce regarded softly.

Silverpaw perked up, curiosity fizzing beneath her paws. What was a cat doing, traveling along the lake? A stab of sadness pierced her heart. Had Sorrelmouse been there, the two would speculate together until they came across the intruder. Instead, there was only a building silence.

The patrol continued onwards, though their pace noticeably quickened as they grew nearer to the stranger. At a fair distance away, Silverpaw could finally catch the scent of the cat, which nearly sent her reeling to a halt.

"It's ShadowClan." Her stomach swooped. "What's a ShadowClan cat doing here?"

Honeywhisker growled, "Nothing good, that's for sure."

For once, Silverpaw found herself agreeing with the tom.

As they approached the enemy warrior, an unfamiliar rage began to brew in Silverpaw's veins as she analyzed the tom's face. His pale ginger muzzle was drawn in a grimace, baring his long fangs, and four claw marks, freshly scarred, lay across it. It took every ounce of willpower to keep her claws in their sheathes, but she managed.

A tail-length from the warrior, Wolfpounce pulled to a stop and lifted his tail. "Gingerfang," he greeted coolly. "What brings you here?"

Gingerfang glared at the trio through slitted eyes. Silverpaw could detect the faintest hint of fear-scent and the even stronger taste of blood lingering on the air.

"I'm simply passing through," he growled lowly, his scarred muzzle peeled back to reveal his long fangs at their fullest. "The lake belongs to no cat."

Honeywhisker snarled, his claws slipping out. "It wouldn't concern me if you hadn't just stolen our land." He tested the air. His amber eyes flashed. "Where's your Clanmate? You're not alone."

Alarm scorched beneath Silverpaw's fur, and she took a deeper breath. Honeywhisker was right; the fresh smell of other cats clung to Gingerfang's pelt, yet they were nowhere in sight. Her claws itched in their sheathes, especially as the large warrior's tail began to nervously flick.

"That's enough, Honeywhisker," Wolfpounce ordered calmly. He turned to address Gingerfang, "You're correct in being within the lakeshore, however, we will need to escort you the rest of the way to your territory."

"That won't be necessary," Gingerfang growled, his discomfort visibly growing. "I know my way just fine, and I'll be sure to stay out of your land."

"We're heading that way, anyways. Don't make this a problem and just let us go with you," Wolfpounce pressed.

The ginger warrior hesitated. His eyes flicked to Silverpaw, his expression visibly souring and his scarred lip curling slightly, before flicking to Honeywhisker, and back to Wolfpounce. "Fine," he relented.

Wolfpounce curtly nodded and moved closer to Gingerfang, flicking his tail briefly for the rest of the patrol to follow.

Silverpaw found herself on the left side of Gingerfang, the forest at her flank, while Honeywhisker took up the rear. Her pelt was lifted while her eyes darted periodically to the tom. Her rage

fizzled, and now, she merely felt uncomfortable, especially with the taste of iron so powerful.

"Where *are* your Clanmates?" She eventually pried as they picked their way along the pebbled shore.

Gingerfang glowered. "That's none of your concern."

"Sure it is," Honeywhisker growled. "Are they on our land, spying on us?"

"Of course not," Gingerfang snorted. "We're not *that* reckless."

"Then what were you doing so far along the lake? ShadowClan has no business here."

"That's none of your concern, either."

Honeywhisker opened his mouth to continue, but Wolfpounce glanced over his shoulder with a glare, silencing the golden tom.

The rest of their journey was in silence, with the cats stopping periodically to mark their boundary.

They reached ShadowClan territory. Gingerfang continued on without glancing back, and the patrol watched until he disappeared from sight. Though another patrol had already done so, they continued on to mark a short distance of ShadowClan's border, just to ensure that their boundary was strong, much to Silverpaw's strife. Blood roared in her ears as they trekked along the pines, and when they finally cut off and began padding deeper within their own territory, her hackles lowered and she could breathe again.

Upon returning to camp, Honeywhisker and Wolfpounce padded to the leader's den to report their findings, while Silverpaw broke off and fetched herself a small salmon, joining Mistpaw and Toadpaw to eat. They chatted idly about the day. Mistpaw had been hunting, while Toadpaw had been a part of the patrol along the ShadowClan border, where fortunately, there was nothing out of the ordinary.

"I'd still like to claw Cloudstar's ears off," he bemoaned after

swallowing a mouthful of vole. "I saw *so* much prey wandering beyond the new scentline. It drives me insane!"

With her hindclaws, Mistpaw kicked at an itch at the back of her ear. "Maybe Pinestar will arrange a mission to reclaim it," she proposed. "No doubt he hates the situation as much as we do. Have you seen the arguments he and the senior warriors have been having?"

Silverpaw was quiet as the two continued their discussion, her stomach churning. Another battle with ShadowClan? Especially with their warriors snooping around, it was certainly plausible, but she didn't think she'd be able to handle it. *Especially* not if Evefrost was there again.

The thought of the former RiverClan warrior stirred a hornet's nest of emotions. Anger, grief, and betrayal all swirled inside of her, as well as a pang of longing as she recalled Sorrelmouse's final moments. When she saw Evefrost next, Silverpaw had no idea what she'd do. Did she even have the strength to fight her?

"Silverpaw?"

Silverpaw jolted. "Sorry, what were you saying?"

"Minnowstripe said she arranged another group training session tomorrow," Mistpaw explained. "I asked if you were looking forward to it."

Silverpaw shrugged. "It could be fun."

Mistpaw's eyes gleamed. "Absolutely! You'll do better this time, I'm certain," she prattled.

The apprentices continued eating, the conversation now diverting to training. Toadpaw was hoping to catch some more land prey on his next patrol. "After all, we don't know when we'll need it," he explained brightly.

Silverpaw nodded eagerly. She always thrived at hunting. According to Sorrelmouse, she had an extraordinarily keen sense of smell, at least for a RiverClan cat. It happened to be one of the few

things she surpassed Owlpaw in. The thought immediately wiped the smile off her face, and she turned her eyes to her paws.

After a few moments, Mistpaw roughly jabbed Silverpaw in the ribs. The tabby whipped around to scowl at her friend. "*What?"* She hissed.

The dark she-cat nodded beyond Silverpaw's shoulders. "Look! Salmonskip's coming over."

Silverpaw whirled around, surprise swimming through her. Was this about the patrol? Had Salmonskip something to say about Gingerfang?

The gray tabby stopped a few tail-lengths away, his amber eyes uneasy. "Silverpaw, Pinestar and I need your assistance," he explained. "I'd like you to join us in his den."

Silverpaw exchanged an astonished glance with her friends. She turned her eyes back to Salmonskip. "You'd like... *my* assistance?" She echoed. "What about Honeywhisker or Wolfpounce?"

Ignoring her question, Salmonskip insisted, "*Immediately*, Silverpaw."

Discomfort bubbled up in her stomach like bile. "Okay."

Waving her tail in farewell to Mistpaw and Toadpaw, she followed after the gray tabby. She gazed up at the gently waving willow fronds, then back ahead as Salmonskip slipped between the roots of the massive tree. Inside, the den was stale and musty. Pinestar was sitting up in his nest, decorated in feathers and smooth stones, and he welcomed the two with a soft murmur.

The leader's eyes, once such a lively green, were dark. His face was gaunt, and his pelt looked like it hadn't been groomed for days. Silverpaw felt her heart drop to her stomach.

There was a tense silence as the leader struggled for words. "You claimed the rogues have a particular scent, yes?"

Anxiously, she swallowed. "That's correct."

Pinestar sighed. He shut his eyes for a moment. When he reopened them, they shone with uncertainty. "I need you to identify a scent for me," he said slowly. "Salmonskip and I found a strange trail on the border, but we cannot know for sure where they originate. We need to know if they're the cats who attacked you and your brother."

Silverpaw flinched. "You expect me to do *what*?"

"I know it's a lot to ask—"

"I can't do it!"

"Silverpaw..." Salmonskip touched his tail to her shoulder.

She backed away from the deputy, her rear brushing against a wall and halting her in her tracks. "I can't do it." Her head snapped back in Pinestar's direction, her chest rapidly rising and falling in a panic. "I can't! I haven't been to that border for moons. I—"

"This isn't up for debate," Pinestar warned. "If it's necessary, you can visit Wishfern to ease your nerves, but this is for the sake of the Clan." His tone wavered, plagued by stress and frustration. "If these truly are the cats who hurt you, we'll be certain that they're a threat, and work correspondingly. We need your help, Silverpaw."

Trembling, the apprentice sat down, her mind a whirlwind of grief. "Couldn't you find one of the cats who rescued me? Surely they smelt the rogues at least once."

Solemnly, Salmonskip shook his head. "The rain washed away any trails, there is too much uncertainty to pin anything down. You're the only cat who can do this."

"Can't Toadpaw come with me?" Silverpaw blurted the first name that came to mind. She could nearly see his green eyes, so warm and comforting. Immediately, however, she began to regret her words, her eagerness for his company nulled by a sense of fear.

The two were quiet for a moment. "Go fetch him," Pinestar mewed. "We'll be leaving shortly."

Silverpaw nodded, her heart in her throat as she backed out of the den. Mistpaw and Toadpaw were still waiting for her, and she trotted over, her tail drooping.

"What was that about?" Mistpaw mewed eagerly, her tail flicking back and forth. "The Clan leader *and* deputy requesting your presence? Crazy!"

Toadpaw's eyes darted along Silverpaw's figure, his tone much softer than his counterpart, "Are you okay?"

Silverpaw could barely meet the eyes of her friends, her mind spinning. *Was this really a good idea?* She wondered, her breath catching as she looked at Toadpaw. *What if it* is *the rogues, and they're waiting for us? What if they kill him, too?*

"I..." she swallowed, squeezing her eyes shut. Wishfern told her that, if in a panic, she needed to breathe. Deep breaths, in through the nose, out through the mouth. "Toadpaw, you'll be joining us on a patrol to the southern border," she explained, her tone stilted. She looked to Mistpaw this time, whose expression fell to one more serious. "Pinestar and Salmonskip think they found the rogue scent. They need me to identify it."

Toadpaw sat taller, the fur along his spine rippling. "I'll go," he said confidently. "When do we leave?"

"Any minute now." Silverpaw's eyes flashed to the leader's den, where the leader and deputy still resided. "I-I'm scared," she whimpered. "I don't want to go."

"You'll be okay," Mistpaw promised. She stepped forward, pressing her nose between Silverpaw's ears. "Do you think I could convince them to let me go, too?"

Silverpaw shook her head. "One of you is enough."

Deflated, Mistpaw nodded. Salmonskip exited the den alone and looked at the apprentices, his gaze questioning. Silverpaw nodded stiffly, and he dipped his head, padding off to the warrior's den. When he exited, Crowspots and Honeywhisker were at his tail. The

group padded towards the camp entrance.

Silverpaw glanced at Toadpaw, her ears flat. "Are you ready?"

Toadpaw nodded. "Of course."

"Stay safe," Mistpaw mewed, her ears folded. "You both better make it back okay."

Silverpaw smiled, but offered no words of reassurance. After all, these were likely the cats who killed Owlpaw. *If they could kill him, who knows what'll happen to us if they strike?* She pushed the thought down and joined the warriors at the camp entrance.

Pinestar finally arrived, and the patrol left camp. The river was a few whisker-lengths higher than it usually was, thanks to the torrential rain from the previous day. The current was muddy and angry, but the crossing stones promised a safe passage to the other side.

They quickly made ground across the territory, picking through the damp terrain until they reached one of the larger rivers in close proximity to the Muddy Shallows. Here, the earth squished underpaw, little rivulets of water seeping from their weight. Water roared along the riverbank, higher than usual and frothing with mud. The air was musky and tasted of dirt—contrary to the typical freshness of rolling water.

"Toadpaw, Silverpaw," Crowspots addressed the two younger cats, "swim together when you cross. The current is powerful today."

Nodding, Silverpaw tucked close to Toadpaw's side, watching keenly as Pinestar and Salmonskip glided through the river together. They crawled onto the opposing bank, a few tail-lengths further downstream, their pelts riddled with mud. Honeywhisker, being a powerful swimmer, followed on his own. Once he reached the other side, Crowspots gestured for Toadpaw and Silverpaw to take their turn.

Sucking in a lungful of breath, Silverpaw plunged into the river—

but to her astonishment, Toadpaw stayed behind. Panic floundered in her chest as the current nearly swept her off her feet, and she cried out, "Toadpaw, come on!"

Alarm flashed in the tom's green eyes, and he dove into the water on her weaker flank, his side firmly pressed against hers. She glanced over at him; the tom was trembling. "Sorry," he whispered. She simply responded with a grunt.

Her paws clacked against pebbles and stones, and she struggled to keep her balance as the current pulled powerfully at her fur. Becoming too difficult to find a foothold, she pushed off the bank and let the river take her.

The roiling current sucked the two apprentices downstream. Silverpaw strongly kicked her paws, struggling to keep her head above the surface past the water's whitecaps. Beside her, she could feel the power of Toadpaw's churning feet.

They swam for what felt like agonizing moons until the tips of her toes brushed against solid ground. The two paddled for a few more tail-lengths until they could stand, crawling past the reeds to meet the safety of the riverbank.

Silverpaw nearly collapsed with relief. "Thank StarClan!" She gasped, shaking out her pelt and sending mud spraying all around.

Toadpaw snorted and gave her a gentle swat on the shoulder. She glanced over. The fear she had been so certain of on his face was gone now, and instead, he bore a teasing scowl. Mud had splattered across his white muzzle.

"Whoops," she chuckled breathlessly.

Toadpaw rolled his eyes in amusement and scooped up a pawful of mud. Silverpaw ducked, but not before the goop landed *splat* against her shoulder. "You fleat-pelt!" She exclaimed, lunging at her friend and tackling him to the ground.

Toadpaw kicked at her stomach, but she held firmly with her forepaws, and the two went rolling through the reeds until

Silverpaw twisted her paws to successfully pin the tom. He growled lightheartedly up at her, a grin dancing across his expression, his green eyes shining with mirth.

"Have you forgotten what we're here for?" Honeywhisker growled.

Silverpaw swiftly backed away, her ears pinned flat as she remembered their mission. "Sorry."

Her heart was pounding in her ears, but thanks to the moment of respite, her anxiety had slightly dwindled. Honeywhisker looked away from the two, and in that moment, Silverpaw took the chance to send Toadpaw a grateful smile. His lip twitched in response.

Pinestar's eyes, past the darkness within them, shimmered faintly in amusement, but he offered no comment. Instead, he turned his eyes back to the river where Crowspots was crawling out, wheezing for breath. Her fur was ragged and weighed down with mud. Her entire body was drenched, her ears and whiskers dripping and caked, as if she'd disappeared under the surface.

"Are you all right?" Salmonskip asked, guiding the warrior up the riverbank.

Crowspots dismissively shook out her pelt. "Of course I am," she retorted. "You don't need to watch me like an elder. I may be old, but I'm yet to retire." She bared her teeth.

Salmonskip shied away, his eyes soft with warmth and concern.

"Well, let's get moving! What are you all waiting for?" Crowspots thrust past the group and trudged further into the trees.

The patrol pushed onward, edging nearer and nearer to the outskirts of the territory. Silverpaw's paws prickled uneasily. They were close to where she'd first discovered the scents of the rogues who killed Owlpaw.

Toadpaw remained close to Silverpaw's side. As if he'd noticed her growing fear, he twined his tail around hers. She flinched, blinking at him.

"You'll be safe with me," the tom promised.

Silverpaw's mouth bobbed, a confliction of emotions stirring in her chest. "Thanks."

He simply nodded in response.

"We're here," Pinestar announced. "Silverpaw, could you please sniff this?" The leader indicated towards an area of trampled underbrush.

Silverpaw felt as though her legs had turned to stone. She tried to sniff the air from where she stood, but the humidity cloaked whatever it was she was meant to smell. Her body low to the ground, she forced herself to move. Her mouth hung open, allowing the scents to bathe her tongue.

The smell of wet grass greeted her, then the sap from a scarred birch, and then the scentline. Her eyes darted to a small pile of bones, maggots crawling over them and eating whatever hadn't been picked clean by crows. The sound of her pounding heart gradually increased in volume until it was all she heard.

She was barely past the boundary when finally, the stench assaulted her nostrils, painfully familiar and bringing her back to the night of horrors. She froze, her hackles rising and her throat tightening. Owlpaw's face flashed before her eyes. Blood sprayed everywhere, agony scored along her body, and the maniacal cackles of rogues thundered in her ears alongside flashes of lightning.

"Silverpaw! Silverpaw, snap out of it!"

Warm fur pressed against her flank, and a violent shaking yanked her from her trance. She blinked vigorously; the blurriness of her eyes faded slightly, her mind still spinning as she refocused on the world around her.

"I-It's them," she choked out, stumbling. Her body crashed against another. Her head snapped around. *Toadpaw.* His green eyes were wide. Otherwise, his body language was calm, soothing, and his tail stroked along her spine. "It's the rogues. The ones who killed

Owlpaw." Saying the words out loud was nauseating, and she had to scrape together all of her courage to keep her voice steady.

Pinestar and Salmonskip exchanged glances. "There's six of us," Pinestar muttered.

"I don't think Silverpaw could bear it."

Pinestar glanced at the silver tabby, conflict in his eyes. "I think she'll have to. This is more important than one apprentice's feelings. And if I'm right..."

"But if you aren't?" Salmonskip's tail flicked anxiously.

The leader hesitated. "I will be."

Sighing, Salmonskip looked at the patrol. "We'll be following the scent to see where it goes."

Silverpaw's eyes stretched wide.

"No!" Toadpaw protested. The high-ranks glanced at him. "At least don't make Silverpaw go," he insisted. "Please."

"She's the most familiar with their scent," Salmonskip coaxed. "Besides, it isn't safe for anybody to be on their own."

"I can stay with her," the black apprentice argued.

Crowspots fixed him with a glare. "I taught you better than to disobey your leader. What Pinestar says goes."

"But..."

Feebly pushing down her fear, Silverpaw nudged the tom. "It... It'll be okay," she croaked.

Toadpaw's tail sagged. "If you say so. I'll be right by your side, all right?"

Silverpaw nodded. "Thank you."

With that settled, Pinestar and Salmonskip took the lead, padding

beyond the border. Silverpaw stayed close to Toadpaw's side, fear pulsing through her veins. The scent seemed to surround her, closing in on her with claws and savagery.

Toadpaw tightened his tail around hers, and she took a shuddering breath, studying him from the corner of her eye. His head was high and his ears were flat. He glimpsed around, on full alert, his shoulder fur ruffled.

Then, the scent vanished.

Silverpaw glanced around wildly, but the entire patrol had pulled to a stop. "I-Is it gone?" She stammered.

"It is..." Honeywhisker circled around, trying to rediscover the trail, while Crowspots wheeled in the opposite direction.

Pinestar breathed deeply. "Nothing?"

There were responding mutters, dissatisfaction staining every warrior's tone.

"It's just as I suspected," Pinestar's frown deepened. "What's troubling is, even though we attempted to trace their scents, and they are quite potent as you pointed out, they appear to have just vanished. I can't smell any overpowering herbs, either, and it doesn't fade gradually, like it should if it were washed out by the rain. It's as if they disappeared into thin air."

Silverpaw's heart thundered in her ears. "Their scents just disappeared? You're saying that they hid it somehow?"

Her mind whirled. If the rogues were capable of disguising their scent... did that mean that they'd left it on purpose the night of Owlpaw's death? But how could they have known they'd be followed? Her head throbbed as she tried to understand.

"That's exactly what I'm saying." Pinestar shook his head idly. "That's all we needed to do. Thank you all, we may return."

"Thank you especially, Silverpaw," Salmonskip added gently.

Silverpaw grimaced, her insides twisting. "I'd say it was no trouble, but... I didn't have much of a choice."

The deputy didn't answer, too busy with his own thoughts as he stared bleakly into the woods.

Chapter Thirteen

[image]

A few sunrises had passed since Silverpaw identified the rogue scent on the border. Patrols had grown more frequent on the southern boundary, and Pinestar was more transparent about the crowfood laid about. It was becoming more probable that the foxes were lured to the border by cats, which only roused more speculation to Silverpaw's intentions, much to her dismay. There wasn't much she could do to convince them she was innocent, especially with Lionpoppy's theories running rampant and her own guilty conscience.

Movement caught her eye, and in a split-second, Silverpaw hooked her claws deep into scaly flesh.

Flicking her paw, she tossed the orange fish out of the water and onto the pebbled riverbank. It flopped around, struggling to make its way back to the river. Silverpaw pounced on it, sinking her teeth into its cold, water-slick scales, her taste buds meeting its hot, savory blood. The fish stopped wriggling after a moment, and she deposited it onto the meager pile by her side.

It was a messy catch, with blood oozing where her claws had scored its side, but it would feed the Clan well. She uttered her thanks to StarClan, and turned her attention back to the river.

The gurgling current melodiously filled her ears, while above, foreboding dark clouds blotted out the sun, carrying the heavy taste of rain. Glaring up at her from the depths of the river was nothing but swirling dust and debris, still affected from the rainstorm a few days prior. Some cats were worried about flooding. After the tragedy last leaf-bare, she wasn't surprised.

Silverpaw's eyes drew back to the depths of the river, and as she waited, a fat droplet of water splattered onto her nose. She sneezed.

"That's one way to scare away all the fish," Honeywhisker hissed

from a few tail-lengths downriver.

Silverpaw twitched her tail. "Wasn't my fault," she retorted.

Honeywhisker huffed and kept his eyes trained on the water. Silverpaw rolled her eyes and did the same. She had been training with the tom for nearly a moon now. His callousness, though still frequent, wasn't as harsh as it had been. He seemed to be mellowing out—as much as a frustrating cat like him could, at least.

Every night, Silverpaw snuck out of camp to practice her battle moves, enough to where the golden warrior was having a difficult time criticizing her in that regard. The only issue, however, was how tired she grew with every passing day. It could be seen in the drag of her paws on patrols, and especially in her sloppy fishing.

The surface of the river, already rippling from its current, grew rougher as rain began to cascade from the heavens. Silverpaw flattened her ears against the thunder of rain against her skull, a growl of irritation slipping from her lips.

A flash of silver darted past her paws. Silverpaw's heart skipped a beat, and in an instant, her claws flexed to graze its side. The fish smacked her wrist with its writhing body and escaped her grasp. Unwilling to give up, Silverpaw launched into the water with a splash, flicking her other paw forward as her head plunged beneath the surface. The roar of the current greeted her ears. Her eyes squinted against debris, the normally clear world below foggy and murky from the storm days ago.

A sliver of blood swept along the current while her paws found leverage, digging fiercely into the fish's scales. The fish, however, was a large one, and with a rough kick of its tail, her grip faltered. Silverpaw's paws flailed as she balanced herself in the current, and she stared in disappointment as her prey faded into the murkiness.

Kicking her paws, Silverpaw burst to the surface, her fur slicked back against her head as she paddled back ashore. Pebbles and reeds crunched underpaw as she dragged herself up, her fur soaked and clinging uncomfortably to her skin. She didn't bother to shake her pelt dry; the rain had increased to a torrential downpour. She

would've been thoroughly soaked regardless of her dip.

Honeywhisker surveyed her through narrowed eyes. "Let's head back," he growled, tearing his gaze away. He grabbed his fish from the pile. "All the prey is gone by now, and this rain is only going to get worse."

Silverpaw nodded in reluctant agreement and retrieved the two fish she'd caught, the fat goldfish and a small perch.

The two cats trudged through the woods, trailing the riverbank before they at last bounded across the crossing stones and into camp. The clearing was soaked, and the only two about were Sandytail and Nightfur chatting quietly near the unusually low fresh-kill pile. Silverpaw trotted over and dropped her haul.

"Did you catch that one by yourself?" Sandytail inquired, his foggy eyes peckishly roaming the bright orange fish.

Silverpaw smiled. "I did."

"Wonderful," the old tom purred, leaning down to grab the goldfish. "You'd best run to your den now. This storm is a nasty one, and it won't be letting off anytime soon."

"Okay," Silverpaw mewed warmly, taking a step backwards. "Thank you."

Sandytail snorted in response, and with a whisk of his thick tail, he trudged towards the fallen log.

"Before you go," Nightfur drew her tail across Silverpaw's path, "get something to eat for yourself."

"Oh, but I'm not hungry," Silverpaw protested.

"Nonsense. Look at how scraggly you are! You look like a StarClan-forsaken WindClan cat," the elder admonished. She snatched a perch from the pile, dropping it at Silverpaw's paws. "Take this with you and enjoy it at your nest. If Pinestar asks why your den smells like fish, tell him I ordered you to." Her whiskers twitched in amusement.

Silverpaw blinked. "If you insist, Nightfur," she mewed reluctantly.

Nightfur curtly nodded and returned to the fresh-kill pile. Silverpaw lingered for a heartbeat longer, and with one final glance at the elder, she grabbed her perch and slipped away to the apprentice's den. She wriggled inside, the constant barrage of rain fading into the background. Pigeonpaw, Finchpaw, Mistpaw, and Toadpaw dozed in their respective nests, tired from the Gathering the night prior.

Silverpaw quietly made her way through the den, careful not to wake her denmates. She arrived at her own pile of moss, weeded with pink shells. Before settling down, she gave her fur a light shake in hopes to dry it.

Once her fur was slightly less soaked, she sighed and flopped into the nest. She winced as a shell dug into her side, and she twisted her neck to rip it free of the moss. The shell was splintered and sharp, with a small bead of red where it had penetrated her skin. Dejectedly, she tossed it to a far corner of the den where nobody would hurt themselves on it.

She returned her attention to the perch and gave it a light sniff. It smelt fine. Delicious, in fact, but her stomach wouldn't have it. Her appetite had faded once more with the realization that the rogues were still around, her stomach twisting with guilt and discontent every time she sat to eat fresh-kill. The thought of them being associated with the fox attack on Spiderfrost and Cloudgaze sent shivers down her spine. What if she could've done something to prevent it?

She groaned, nudging it away with her nose and resting her head on her paws. Perhaps she'd eat it later.

"Hey, cloud-fluff!"

She blinked and turned her head slightly. Mistpaw's head was craned in her direction, her green eyes bright in the darkness. "Are you going to eat that?"

Silverpaw hesitated. "No," she admitted. "You can have it."

Mistpaw stretched luxuriously to her paws, letting her tail arch with the curve of her spine, and gave her toes a little wiggle before she padded cheerfully to Silverpaw's side. Pushing the perch back towards the nest, she gave her friend a brisk, reassuring lick between the ears and snuggled up next to her.

"I know you said you're not going to eat it, but you look like a WindClan cat," she mewed brightly, unknowingly echoing the words of Nightfur. "You won't become a warrior if you're all skin and bones!" She tore a bite out of the perch and let out a contented purr. "It's delicious," she mumbled around the mouthful of food, "I promise."

Silverpaw stared at her, tempted to refuse, but the worry shining in Mistpaw's eyes encouraged her. With a sigh, she relented, and she took a tender bite out of the perch. Though the back of her mind knew the meat was sweet and succulent, the forefront detected it as dry and tasteless, struggling down her throat like a slab of bark.

Finally swallowing, Silverpaw bore a grimace.

"See?" Mistpaw purred. "Wasn't so bad, was it?"

Silverpaw shrugged. "I guess."

Eating another piece, Mistpaw's eyes meandered across her friend's face. "Remember what I told you the morning after Sorrelmouse died?" She mewed abruptly. "Regardless of what happens, you won't be alone. Lichenpaw, Toadpaw and I are always going to be here for you, but we can't help you if you don't let us." Pausing briefly, she continued, more forcefully, "Tell me what's wrong, Silverpaw."

Silverpaw's gut squirmed, and she looked away from her friend, tearing off a small strip of fish. She was quiet while she chewed it, taking her time. "I... don't know."

Mistpaw scoffed. "Of course you know. You're thinking about it now, Silverpaw."

Silverpaw flinched. Mistpaw was right. Her thoughts were swimming in circles, taunting her with the face of the rogue tom,

leading foxes in a mission to maim, or even kill, one of her Clanmates.

"I wish I could've done more," she admitted at last, her ears pinned against her skull. "It's my fault the rogues are here, the reason Spiderfrost and Cloudgaze are hurt."

"How is that your fault?" Mistpaw scoffed, picking a claw between some teeth. "You can't control what other cats do."

"I know, but—"

"Stop right there!" Mistpaw interrupted. "Why are you so adamant on believing *you're* the reason the rogues are by the border?"

"*I'm* the one who wanted to sneak out and find them! If I never did that, Owlpaw would've never died, and everything would be okay!" Silverpaw retorted, her tail lashing.

"You can't seriously believe that, can you?" Mistpaw growled. "Any cat could've done the same thing, and they would've met the same demise, but it wouldn't have been their fault. You need to stop blaming yourself for things outside of your control."

Silverpaw shivered. "Why should I?" she mumbled. "Not even my own mother loves me anymore because of it, and now, Sorrelmouse is gone, too. And if I never fell behind in my training... maybe I could've saved her." Her eyes stung, and it took a moment for her to realize that tears were beginning to spill down her cheeks. "Sorry," she mumbled, looking away and rubbing a paw across her face.

"Their deaths aren't your fault, you fish-brain! Owlpaw followed you of his own volition, and there's no way either of you would've known what the rogues would do. Sorrelmouse's death wasn't your fault, either. Killing *is* against the warrior code."

"But—"

"No!" Mistpaw thrust her muzzle in Silverpaw's face. "You're not to blame. You're as innocent as any of us."

"How can I be? I was directly involved in it all..."

"That's just terrible luck, and after everything happened, you did your best to get help."

Silverpaw fell silent, her heart racing so fast that her throat throbbed. She couldn't bear to look her friend in the eye.

Mistpaw buried her nose in Silverpaw's shoulder, softly purring reassurance. "You mouse-brain," she muttered. "What am I meant to do with you?"

They trickled into silence. Mistpaw gently lapped at the fur between Silverpaw's ears as her tears turned to hiccups. At last, when the apprentice's shaking subsided, the black she-cat withdrew and spoke softly, "Let's finish this perch, you still haven't eaten enough."

Silverpaw, her eyes still blurry from her tears, turned her attention back to the fresh-kill. "Okay," she agreed.

She leaned forward and took a bite out of its flesh, but this time, it wasn't as difficult to swallow. A shred of comfort had weaseled its way to her aching heart, and her shoulders felt lighter, as if she weren't carrying the weight of everything all on her own. She realized with a start that she hadn't cried since Sorrelmouse's death, and especially not in front of anybody else.

The apprentices finished their meal in silence, the warmth of solace in the air. Mistpaw crawled out of the nest to groom herself, and Silverpaw watched quietly before resolving to do the same. Her fur, now dry from the rain, was matted and sticking out in all directions. She took care to meticulously smooth it out and unwind the knots in silence.

Eventually, curiosity won the best of her. "What happened at the Gathering last night?" She inquired, dragging her tongue across the base of her tail.

Mistpaw paused, her green eyes glimmering. "Pinestar had an earful for ShadowClan," she mewed between licks. "Cloudstar didn't give a rat's tail that Sorrelmouse died to one of his warriors, and they got into quite the quarrel. StarClan covered the moon before Pinestar could claw Cloudstar's ears off. If I have any say, I think they

should've let him!" A small *mrrow* escaped her.

"He deserves it," Silverpaw agreed, anger mingled with hurt fizzling in her paws. She twisted her neck and dragged her tongue furiously along her spine, pulling away thick mouthfuls of fur. She aggressively spat it out, and released a deep sigh. "Do you think that's why the weather's been so awful today?"

Mistpaw tilted her head with a soft trill. "Perhaps, but only if ShadowClan has it worse."

Silverpaw felt a smile creep to her face at the thought. She could imagine Mossrunner and Cloudstar dripping with soddy water, but the light was chased away by the recollection of Evefrost. *That traitor. I'd bet she taught them all how to swim and eat fish,* she thought disdainfully.

"Silverpaw."

She was torn from her musings, and she turned to see Honeywhisker peeking in from the den entrance, water streaming from his pelt. He flicked an ear, sending a spray of droplets into the den. "Looks like you won't be having the day off," he said bitterly. "We're patrolling the ShadowClan border with Pigeonpaw and Lionpoppy. Wake him up and meet us by the camp entrance, we'll be leaving as soon as you get there."

Silverpaw frowned. "I'll be there in a few minutes." She pointedly licked a paw and drew it over her ears.

Honeywhisker narrowed his eyes, a debate clearly lingering on his tongue. "As long as you make it quick," he growled instead, dipping back outside.

Silverpaw shuddered and returned to grooming, lapping her paw and washing her whiskers, before she quickly brushed her stomach and flanks smooth. Rising to her paws, she shot a glance at Mistpaw, who was still running her tongue along her pelt.

"I'll see you later," she mewed weakly.

Mistpaw looked up. "Stay safe."

Silverpaw nodded stiffly, flicking Mistpaw's nose with the tip of her tail. "I'll try," she said, padding off to find Pigeonpaw.

Nestled in his bedding, the gray tabby was rolled onto his back, his paws splayed in the air and his mouth agape. A gurgling snore thundered from his lungs. Silverpaw gave him a sharp jab in the side. Snorting, the tom flipped onto his belly, groggily looking around.

"Whaddaya want?" He slurred, blinking rapidly until his eyes settled on Silverpaw.

"Get up, you're needed on a border patrol."

Pigeonpaw visibly brightened, and he burst to his paws. "Great! Give me a minute to clean myself. I promise I'll be quick!"

Silverpaw blinked, and as the tom robustly began to groom his fur, she turned and left him to his own devices.

Emerging into the clearing, the cold and unpleasant wall of rain melted into her fur, soaking her to the bone. She shivered, squinting to see through the downpour. She padded across the slick clearing, her pawsteps squishing against the wet ground. She could just barely pick up the hushed mumbles of conversation between Lionpoppy and Honeywhisker.

Awkwardly, she entered their range of view and sat down a few tail-lengths away. Lionpoppy's eyes flashed harshly over, her lip curling. Silverpaw stripped her gaze away and instead rested it on Honeywhisker, who's demeanor was surprisingly more welcoming.

"Shouldn't we have more warriors?" She tentatively suggested. "What if ShadowClan attacks again?"

"We'll be fine," Honeywhisker grunted. "Your skills are... *acceptable*."

Silverpaw's pelt prickled at the praise. Though his words were surprising, they weren't any more comforting. After all, Sorrelmouse had died on a patrol with more warriors than they had now.

Her gaze fell to the earth, where rain swirled up in muddy puddles.

She could feel Lionpoppy's eyes burning into her fur, no friendlier than they had been since Owlpaw died.

She fluffed out her pelt, both to protect herself from the icy rain and her mother's intense scrutiny.

Chapter Fourteen

[image]

Lionpoppy's growing annoyance was betrayed by the rapid flicks of her tail.

"Where is that apprentice?" She hissed, her ears angled towards the den. "You did wake him up, didn't you?" Her eyes darted to Silverpaw, fire dancing in their amber depths.

"Of course I did," Silverpaw snapped.

"It sure doesn't seem like it," Lionpoppy retorted. "What, are you trying to make me look like a fool? Go on and actually fetch him!"

The silver apprentice scoffed, rage boiling under her skin. "Why don't you get him yourself?"

Lionpoppy's lip drew back, and she took a furious step forward. A flash of fear overtook Silverpaw, and her ears fell back as she recalled Lionpoppy's wicked claws in the darkness of a storm-filled night, silhouetted by a flash of lightning. Struggling to tame her emotions, she bared her teeth, praying to StarClan she looked braver than she felt.

"That's enough, Silverpaw," Honeywhisker butted in, fixing her with a stern glare.

Was that... concern in his eyes?

Certainly not, Silverpaw dismissed. *He just doesn't want to deal with my mother.*

"Listen to Lionpoppy and fetch Pigeonpaw," he finished.

Silverpaw's eyes flashed between the two warriors, tempted to argue, but at last she relented, heaving to her paws and storming back to the apprentice's den. Before she could enter, however, Pigeonpaw bustled out, his tabby fur ruffled and unkempt as if he'd

just woken up from a long night's sleep, contrary to the groomed appearance she'd expected. Silverpaw narrowed her eyes as the young tom gave his paws a brisk, clumsy lick as he bumbled towards her.

"Sorry for taking so long!" He chirped, shaking out his pelt. "Finchpaw woke up and distracted me. She had such a cool dream!" His amber eyes shone.

Lionpoppy snorted, and once the apprentice reached her side, she cuffed him lightly over the ear. "You're an apprentice now, you can't let yourself get distracted like that," she chastised, her voice light with a trickle of amusement.

Pigeonpaw shyly ducked his head. "Yes, Lionpoppy."

Lionpoppy smiled and touched her nose gently to his forehead. "Now that we're all here," her eyes sharpened like thorns as they settled upon Silverpaw, "let's get moving."

Whisking her tail, the pale tabby led the patrol out of camp. Pigeonpaw's amber eyes were round as they entered the forest, the excitement in the jerkiness of his movements akin to a cat being outside camp for the first time, even though it had already been a moon since his apprenticeship began.

Once they reached the crossing stones, he nervously peeked into the dark river. Water frothed and lashed angrily against the banks, and a thin layer had even overtaken the pathway.

"Come on," Lionpoppy meowed.

Frightened, Pigeonpaw crept to her side. "It looks dangerous," he reproached.

"Stay by my side as we cross. You'll be just fine." Lionpoppy's motherly tone twisted like a thorn to Silverpaw's heart, but she gritted her teeth in hopes to ignore it.

Pigeonpaw bobbed his head, and with Lionpoppy's tail draped assertively over his shoulders, they crossed to the other side unscathed.

Pigeonpaw released a cheerful purr. "Thanks!"

Next, it was Silverpaw and Honeywhisker's turn to cross. Bitter water sloshed over Silverpaw's paws as she gripped at the slick stones. Her claws dug in as fiercely as she could, but deep down, she knew a single powerful wind could blow her straight into the churning current. Leaping carefully, she safely breached the other side, her paws sinking into mud.

The patrol continued on immediately. Pigeonpaw fell naturally into step with Silverpaw, while Honeywhisker and Lionpoppy padded ahead, side-by-side as they lapsed into conversation. The rain-thick air was only penetrated by the squelch of pawsteps, not even the scuttle of a mouse detectable over its thrumming.

"Do you know where we're going?"

It took a moment for Silverpaw to realize Pigeonpaw was speaking to her. She cast him a sideways glance. The tom was walking with a bounce to his step, briefly reminding her of an overexcitable squirrel.

"Nobody told you?" She flicked her tail idly.

"No," he responded, just as bright as before.

"We're headed to the ShadowClan border," Silverpaw explained bitterly, leaping gracefully over a short stretch of river.

Pigeonpaw followed closely behind her, scrunching his small body before he sprang. He landed in sopping grass, but his paws found no hold. He yelped, his hind paws scraping against loose gravel as he slithered back towards the furious brook.

Silverpaw lurched forward and sank her teeth into the young tom's scruff. Her heart pelted as the roiling current lapped hungrily at Pigeonpaw's wildly scrabbling paws. Her claws skidded against the earth as she struggled to find leverage. Mustering her strength, she swung her neck, her muscles straining as she pulled him back to solid ground.

Gasping, she released him.

"StarClan!" Pigeonpaw exclaimed, scrambling to his paws. "Th-Thank you." His amber eyes flashed anxiously back to the river. He visibly swallowed.

Silverpaw closed her eyes for a heartbeat. "No problem," she muttered, reopening them. Her eyes trailed along the path Lionpoppy and Honeywhisker had taken, long out of sight. "Let's catch up, they can't be far."

His fear forgotten, Pigeonpaw nodded eagerly, racing after the older apprentice as she trotted along their mentor's scent trails. She wove confidently through the undergrowth, following a slightly beaten path that indicated their mentor's passage.

"How do you know where we're going?" Pigeonpaw piped up as he stepped over a large stone. "Everything smells so... muddled." His nose crinkled.

Silverpaw shrugged mindlessly. "I've been told I'm good at tracking," she replied softly, her thoughts straying to Sorrelmouse. "If you breathe deeply, you can smell where they went, but you also must rely on your other senses. See here," she nosed a fern. A small tuft of golden hair clung to its leaves.

"That's Honeywhisker's fur!"

"Exactly."

Pigeonpaw touched his nose lightly against the hair and gave it a sniff. He pulled back and glanced around. "I don't see any more fur, though, and I still can't smell them past this rain."

Silverpaw purred in amusement, surprising herself with the sound. "Do you see the crushed grass?"

Pigeonpaw wrinkled his nose. "Yeah."

"That's a good indicator that they've passed through here. I don't smell any foxes or badgers, so it has to be one of our Clanmates at the very least." She lowered her nose, gently brushing it against the grass. The scents of Honeywhisker and Lionpoppy greeted her, faint amid the dampness, but present nonetheless. "The closer you are to

the ground, the more powerful their trail will be, too."

Pigeonpaw's eyes expanded wider than Silverpaw thought possible, and she was swept with a wave of amusement as the little tom scampered ahead, shoving his nose into the wet dirt. "Their scent is clearer down here!" His muffled voice cried.

Silverpaw's mouth twitched into a smile. "Yes, but that's enough!" She grabbed him by the scruff and hauled his face out of the mud. His pale muzzle was painted brown, and with a startled squeak, he violently shook his head, sending the mud flying.

"StarClan!" Silverpaw yelped, ducking away from the splatter, her smile broadening into a grin. "Don't breathe *in* the dirt, you fish-brain. If you inhale it, you'll start sneezing like a fox in a fit!"

Pigeonpaw's muzzle scrunched, and he sharply exhaled to clear his nostrils. "Gross."

"*Yeah,"* Silverpaw snorted, flicking his side with her tail. "Now come on, we're losing their scent."

Pigeonpaw nodded eagerly, scampering beside her, his eyes round and more attentive to his surroundings.

As they edged nearer to the ShadowClan border, pines began to loom above them, weaving through RiverClan's bare trees from beyond the new scentline. Their heavy leaves bounced in the rain, lashing out with the wind as if trying to claw at the air. Silverpaw uneasily lowered her head. The trees were so tall, she wondered if they could touch the stars.

Purring eagerly, Pigeonpaw careened into a pile of pine needles. His toes flexed among the orange scraps, prancing in circles around the detritus.

"What are you doing?" Silverpaw exclaimed, bounding forward.

Pigeonpaw tossed a grin over his shoulder. "They're soft!" He purred. "I thought pine needles would be sharp. Why aren't they sharp?"

Silverpaw shook her head in bewilderment. "They're just like leaves, but for the pines. You haven't been to this border yet?"

"No, Lionpoppy said it was too dangerous for me," he expressed with a faint pout.

Silverpaw scoffed, but found herself agreeing with the sentiment. She hadn't been to the ShadowClan border since her mentor's passing, aside from the time she had helped escort Gingerfang. The thought of encountering one of their patrols twisted her mind in disgust. They were truly vile cats. Subconsciously, her eyes strayed to ShadowClan territory, searching for any flicker of fur.

"Come on," she said, shaking out her pelt. "Now's not the time to play around."

"*Okay,"* Pigeonpaw groaned, falling back into pace with the older apprentice.

Instead of training his eyes on the forest, however, his amber gaze burned into Silverpaw's fur, as though he were trying to probe the answers to all of his questions from her head. Self-consciously, she turned away.

The border was freshly marked. Clearly, Honeywhisker and Lionpoppy were continuing the patrol, but how had they not noticed that their apprentices were missing? She frowned, but ignored the thought as their trail strengthened.

"We've nearly caught up," she mewed, glancing over her shoulder. Her ears twitched in surprise, and she froze. "Pigeonpaw?" The little tom wasn't there. "Pigeonpaw, where are you?"

Lashing her tail, Silverpaw raced back in the direction she came from, panic devouring her every movement. Did a ShadowClan patrol capture him? *Worse,* what if the rogues were there? She nearly felt sick as another thought entered her mind: *what if he's dead?* Her heart thundered in her ears as she ducked under a bush, peering through the twigs and scraping along to the other side. Still, she couldn't see him.

Rain poured from the sky with the density of a waterfall, rapidly washing the scents away. As she carefully sniffed the ground, she found the barest remnants of his passage, mingled with her own scent. She turned around, following it back until his trail split apart, growing fainter by the second.

She pushed through a wall of bracken, and found herself standing on ShadowClan's scent line. She tested the air once, twice, just to make sure, but by the third attempt she was certain. He'd crossed into the enemy Clan's territory.

Bile threatened to surge up her throat as she stepped over the border, dizzy with disbelief and fear. She parted her mouth to call out to him, but quickly snapped it shut. *If another patrol did capture him, I can't let them know I'm here,* she told herself.

She pushed deeper into the pines, watching as the naked forest faded into evergreen life.

A faint voice touched the tufts of her ears. "Silverpaw! Silverpaw!"

Silverpaw sped up to a run, dodging around brambles and shrubbery. Finally, through the rain, she spotted the gray tabby wandering through the woods, his ears flat and eyes fearful. "Silverpaw, I'm lost!"

"Pigeonpaw!" Silverpaw shouted. "Over here!"

The little tom whirled around, his expression immediately lifting. He raced over, and the two met in moments. He pressed up against her, trembling in relief. "Oh, thank StarClan," he gasped, "I'm so glad you're here! It's so rainy and confusing, I didn't know where you went or where I was."

Silverpaw lashed her tail and backed away. "We'll talk later. For now, we need to get out of here."

"Can't we rest for a minute?" Pigeonpaw pleaded.

Shaking her head, Silverpaw growled, "No. We're on ShadowClan territory."

Eyes widening, Pigeonpaw snapped his mouth shut and nodded. Together, they sprinted through the territory, Silverpaw's hackles raised the entire time.

When they drew across the border, she sucked in a deep breath of relief. She was still tense, but she led the little tom to a pile of bare underbrush, guiding him beneath the branches where the downpour was less intense. He mewed his thanks and they huddled together. He was trembling, his entire pelt sagged with water.

Once his shaking ebbed, Silverpaw forced him to his paws and the duo continued on the trail. By now, the scents of their mentors had faded, but Silverpaw knew the general direction they were headed in. Frustration itched at her claws, but she kept her temper under check for Pigeonpaw's sake.

After all, the little apprentice was terrified.

Finally, she rediscovered their trail, but the further they padded along, a new smell tinged the air, metallic with the tang of blood shadowed by the musky odor of ShadowClan. Her heart picked up speed, and she drew her tail across Pigeonpaw's path. The tom looked up at her, his eyes wide.

"What's wrong?" He squeaked.

"I smell blood."

Pigeonpaw fluffed out his fur and flexed his claws. "Okay, let's go help!"

"No," Silverpaw hissed, horrified by the suggestion. "I smell ShadowClan, too. You'll help by running back to camp and retrieving backup. You can find your way, can't you?"

His eyes stretched even wider. "I-I can try."

"Good," Silverpaw swallowed her anxiety, which clawed at her throat like desperate rats, and lowered her head to meet his eyes. "Now be quick. Try to retrace our pawsteps, but don't go into the pines. You can remember what I taught you about tracking, yeah?"

Pigeonpaw nodded earnestly, and he backed away a few paces. "Be careful," he mewed, before haring off into the underbrush. The sopping wet grass and needles squelched beneath his thundering pawsteps, and Silverpaw stared after him until the sounds faded into the background assault of rain.

Squeezing her eyes, Silverpaw steeled herself and burst through the trees. Her paws thumped loudly against the puddle-strewn ground, her pace spurred by her fright. The last ShadowClan battle swirled in her mind. *What do I do if one of them dies?* Her heart ached at the thought. Even after her mother had disowned her, she had to admit that she still cared for her. She was her *mother,* for StarClan's sake.

She exploded through the foliage, the powerful stench of blood strengthening as she emerged into a clearing where Lionpoppy and Honeywhisker were locked in battle with an enemy patrol. It was a frenzy of four against two, and from what she could tell, one of the enemies was an apprentice. The rest, of course, were warriors.

Lionpoppy's snarl split the air as she faced off against two warriors, a burly black tom with strange white spotting, and a slim silver she-cat. The ShadowClan warriors pressed their flanks together and charged as one, their claws battering at Lionpoppy in perfect synchronization. The pale tabby hissed and backed away, but she couldn't escape the dual assault.

Her body seized with fear, and it took a moment for Silverpaw to reign it in. She charged forward, latching her claws deep into the silver warrior's shoulders, who she recognized to be Bluedawn. Lionpoppy spun on the tom and kept him preoccupied, swiping her claws across his cheek while Silverpaw ripped the ShadowClan she-cat away.

Bluedawn tore herself free from Silverpaw's grip and whirled around to face her, her teeth bared. "It's your fault he's dead!" She spat furiously.

Not giving the apprentice enough time to register her words, she darted forward and snapped her teeth, finding the flesh of Silverpaw's ear. As she pulled away, so did the tip, earning a shriek from Silverpaw. In retaliation, she slashed her claws at Bluedawn's

shoulders, shredding bits of fur and flesh. She darted nimbly away with a flurry of blood, and it took the entirety of her willpower to keep her bearing at the sight of the crimson liquid. Her spine arched and she hissed through gritted teeth.

Bluedawn didn't even bat an eye at Silverpaw's threatening display. She leaped at the silver apprentice with a snarl, tackling her to the ground where they rolled around in a writhing mess of teeth and claws. The ShadowClan warrior's claws gripped Silverpaw's sides, tearing painfully into her flanks. Silverpaw's back slammed against the ground—*pinned.* Sharpening her focus, Silverpaw extended her claws to their fullest and battered at Bluedawn's soft belly fur. Hot, sticky blood soaked her feet and splattered onto her fur. Bluedawn yowled, quickly pulling away from the RiverClan apprentice.

Silverpaw rolled to her paws, her flanks messy and stinging with blood. She kept her tail close to her side, recalling the agony of it being pulled in her last battle. She glanced back at Bluedawn, and realized that the enemy cat was worse for wear. Her stomach oozed a sickening flow of crimson, and she was panting, blue eyes glittering angrily.

"We'll get our payback, just you wait," she growled. She took a hesitant step back, before she spun around and crashed through the forest, fleeing back to her side of the border.

Frozen in shock, Silverpaw stared after her. *Did I just... win?*

Before she could comprehend her own feat on top of what the enemy warrior had said, a pair of claws cuffed her over the ears. Silverpaw ducked with a yelp, her claws splaying out, only to find herself face-to-face with Lionpoppy's livid amber eyes.

"Where in the name of StarClan were you?" Lionpoppy's lips curled in a snarl, her hot breath washing over Silverpaw's face.

Silverpaw shrank away, her claws slipping back into their sheathes. Her eyes darted around, but the ShadowClan cats were gone. All who remained in the clearing were herself, Lionpoppy, and Honeywhisker. The golden tom was too busy washing his nasty wounds to spare a glance at the she-cats.

Lionpoppy's growl rose. "I asked you a question. Look at me! What did you do to my apprentice? Did you kill him, too?"

Silverpaw blinked up at her in astonishment. "Kill him? Why would I do that?" She demanded.

"A murderer never strikes only once!"

Silverpaw staggered backwards as the crazed she-cat crept closer. "I'm not a murderer! I sent Pigeonpaw back to camp to get help," she stammered, her paws scrabbling against the earth as her mother loomed above her.

Silverpaw flinched. Her back thumped against a tree.

"Look at you," Lionpoppy's voice was dangerously low. "Covered in blood, like the killer you are. Whose blood is this?" She lurched forward. Silverpaw's body jerked as she scooped up one of her paws, pressing the base to forcefully unsheathe them. Silver hairs that were not her own clumped between them, the blood turning pink as it washed away from the rain. "Is this Pigeonpaw's fur? His blood? *Where is he?"*

"H-he should've arrived at camp by now," Silverpaw cried, snatching her paw away, bristling against the tree. "A patrol should be arriving at any moment!"

"Liar!"

Silverpaw squeezed her eyes shut as Lionpoppy lifted her arm high into the air, claws unsheathed and ready to inflict damage. She screamed at her body to move, to dodge out of the way, but fear turned her to stone.

The underbrush beyond her mother rustled noisily, and Silverpaw's eyes snapped open to see Lionpoppy dropping her claws and backing a few paces away, her eyes narrowed to slits and cast towards the foliage. Silverpaw released the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

Pigeonpaw exploded into the clearing, his eyes bright and triumphant with a patrol following shortly behind him. Pinestar,

Salmonskip, Minnowstripe, and Quietoak. Honeywhisker perked up at the sight.

"I found my way back to camp!" The little gray tom triumphed.

"Pigeonpaw, you're all right!" Lionpoppy purred, immediately showering the apprentice in brisk licks.

"Is everybody okay?" Pinestar demanded. Wishfern emerged from the undergrowth, a bundle of herbs swinging from her jaw.

"A ShadowClan patrol saw us marking the border and decided to attack," Honeywhisker growled.

As Wishfern checked the golden tom's wounds, Pinestar narrowed his eyes. "Without provocation?"

Honeywhisker nodded, wincing as Wishfern prodded a particularly tender spot. Pinestar's jaw shifted slightly. It looked as though he didn't quite believe Honeywhisker's words.

"Are you all right?"

Silverpaw jolted, and looked at Salmonskip, who had come to her side. She quickly smoothed her bristled fur and gave a stiff nod.

"You seem distressed. Was it because of the battle?" The deputy murmured.

Silverpaw shook her head before she could stop herself.

"Then why?"

"I—" Silverpaw's eyes darted to Lionpoppy, then back to Salmonskip, then to her paws. "It's nothing."

Salmonskip followed her gaze to Lionpoppy, a frown drawing across his features.

"So what exactly happened?" Pinestar asked, swishing his tail. "Pigeonpaw claims that you," he fixed Lionpoppy with a glare, "left him and Silverpaw to fend for themselves, while you claim that

they ran off on their own." He switched his gaze to Honeywhisker. "Care to explain?"

Honeywhisker drew away from Minnowstripe to regard his leader, his tail flicking nervously back and forth. He swallowed, eyes lowered respectfully. "Pigeonpaw told the truth," he admitted quietly. "Lionpoppy and I failed to keep a proper eye on the apprentices, and they lost track of us in the process. We were then ambushed and nearly lost the battle until Silverpaw arrived and helped fend them off."

"Thank you, Honeywhisker. Once you and Silverpaw have been treated, I expect you to accompany Wishfern back to camp. The rest of you, Pigeonpaw included, will finish the patrol." Pinestar drew his gaze back to Lionpoppy, whose expression fell blank. "*You* will come with me."

The brown tom lashed his tail and shouldered through the underbrush, back towards the depths of the territory. Reluctantly, Lionpoppy trailed after him, her cold expression now shifted to one of fear.

Wishfern soon came to Silverpaw's aid, inspecting and patching her wounds. When she reached up to her ear, she murmured, "You've permanently lost the tip, but otherwise you should heal unscarred."

"Thank you," Silverpaw breathed.

Wishfern nodded quietly, stepping away. "Let's go."

Silverpaw and Honeywhisker followed silently after the medicine cat. Rain spattered against Silverpaw's fur, chilly, yet comforting. Every step lanced through her injuries, but in spite of the pain, she felt a growing excitement in her chest. She'd actually defeated a ShadowClan warrior!

The closer they grew to camp, the higher her pride soared, until she found herself beaming. For the first time since Owlpaw had died, she didn't feel like a disappointment.

Maybe she really was destined to become a warrior.

Chapter Fifteen

[image]

Nearly a quarter-moon had passed since the scuffle on ShadowClan's border. Silverpaw's wounds had healed well, as Wishfern foretold, and the cobwebs that had tightly patched together her flanks were gone. Though her fur hadn't grown back in its entirety, it was making progress, and wouldn't scar. More concerningly, however, was the rising activity on the southern border. Every day patrols found piles of crowfood and the stench of foreign cats impeding their scentlines, which only drove away nearby prey, as well as driving more fear into Silverpaw. Were they planning an attack, or something worse?

"...and that's how I defeated a fox all on my own," Sandytail purred, his foggy amber eyes glistening with a smile.

Silverpaw jolted away from her thoughts, realizing that her paws had been working on their own. She peeled away the bile-ridden moss and watched as the final tick shriveled up in death, tumbling lifelessly to the floor. "That's impressive," she mewed distractedly. She nosed through the elder's fur one final time before confirming that she'd rid him of the parasites. "Is there anything else I can help you with?"

Sandytail rumbled happily. "Perhaps give me a scratch behind the ol' ear?"

"Uh, sure." She moved her claws forward, but he bumped them away with his muzzle.

"I was just kidding," he grunted. "Young cats these days, can't tell what a joke is!"

Flustered, she backed away. "Sorry," she mumbled.

Sandytail shook his head. "Oh, it's whatever, Silverpaw. Thank you for getting them nasty ticks off my back. I swear, it's my family

trying to take me to StarClan early!"

Silverpaw smiled and scooped up the putrid bundle of moss. "I'd hope not, I'll miss your stories when you're gone," she mewed.

"At least there's *somebody* who would." The old tom's eyes crinkled. "Good luck out there." He added shakily, leaning forward to rasp his tongue warmly across her cheek.

Silverpaw beamed at the rare show of affection from the grouchy old tom, and with a flourish of her tail, she left, emerging from the fallen log into the clearing. The sky was dark with clouds, and the air was as cold as ice. Spiderfrost lounged in the clearing under a fleeting stream of warm sunlight, her eye slitted shut. Her wounds were at last free from cobwebs, and past the infection she had fought through, she finally appeared to be healing well, while her gouged eye remained pinned shut under herbs. Her brother was still stuck in the confines of the medicine den.

Pigeonpaw and Finchpaw were huddled around the fresh-kill pile, arguing over which delicacy they should pick. Silverpaw's heart twisted at the sight. *Owlpaw and I would argue over something stupid like that,* she envied, but she dismissed the thought swiftly and made her way to the dirtplace where she deposited the vile moss.

"Cleaning the ticks again?" Mistpaw mewed from behind her, her nose wrinkled with distaste.

"Yes, but this time, it was of my own accord," Silverpaw replied cheerfully.

"*Willingly?"* Mistpaw gasped. "Do you have bees in your brain?"

Silverpaw shrugged, padding past her friend and towards the camp entrance. "No, I just promised Sandytail I'd visit, and dealing with his ticks is the only way Honeywhisker would allow me to."

"All that torture to visit Sandytail? Really?" Mistpaw trotted after her as they exited camp.

Silverpaw dipped her paws into the river, watching her fur sway in its current as she washed them free of bile. "Yes, he's a very sweet

cat," she insisted.

"If you say so," Mistpaw mewed, thoroughly unconvinced. "Ravenfire says he's intolerable and doesn't know how to stop grumbling."

"Like you?" Silverpaw teased.

"I do too!"

"What about the time Toadpaw stuck a mouse tail behind your ear?"

"That—That's different!"

"Is it, though?" Silverpaw glanced out of the corner of her eye.

Mistpaw had dropped to a crouch, waggling her hindquarters in preparation for a pounce. The silver tabby whirled around, bursting past her friend in a sprint.

"Get back here so I can claw your ears off!" The black apprentice cried.

"Only if you can catch me!"

Silverpaw raced along what was left of the riverbank, swerving away from the camp entrance and instead hugging the sides of the river. It had been a bitter, rainy moon, and though most of the storms had come to pass, the rivers were still swollen. Racing along what should've been the shoreline, her paws splashed through shallow water.

She glanced over her shoulder. Mistpaw wasn't far behind, a determined fire in her eyes as she pursued her. Silverpaw looped around the camp until the water grew as deep as her belly fur, in which case she tucked her paws to her stomach and paddled the rest of the way.

She reached the entrance again and slipped inside, praying that Mistpaw was far enough behind to have missed her escape. She panted, and hugging the side of the clearing, she found a place near some cattails. She pushed through the shrubbery, mostly out of

sight of the rest of the clearing. She shook out her pelt and sat down to groom herself.

"Hiding from my sister?"

Silverpaw nearly leaped out of her fur, whirling around to find herself nose-to-nose with Toadpaw. "Don't scare me like that!" She hissed, batting at his face.

The tom blinked, and rubbed his muzzle with a paw. "Sorry."

Rolling her eyes, Silverpaw shuffled to the side, offering him room to join her.

"Where's Lichenpaw?" Silverpaw queried, peering through the leaves. Mistpaw had entered the clearing, and was searching high and low for her.

"Nightpatch took her out for more battle training."

Silverpaw flicked her whiskers. "That's the fifth day in a row, isn't it?"

Toadpaw sighed. "Yeah."

"Found ya!"

Silverpaw recoiled as Mistpaw butted her nose into the corner, tossing a goldfish towards the two cats. It landed square at Silverpaw's paws. She squeezed inside with a delighted *mrrow,* and tapped Silverpaw on the nose.

Silverpaw slapped her back, but before the two she-cats could launch into a tussle, Toadpaw flicked his tail between the two. "Silverpaw needs to save her energy," he admonished. "She can't pass her assessment if she's exhausted."

"Oh, whatever," Mistpaw grunted, snapping up a mouthful of meat from the orange fish. "You're such a worry-worm." She passed it to Toadpaw, and he dutifully took a bite.

Silverpaw looked away in embarrassment. Toadpaw was right. If

she wanted to pass her warrior's assessment, she had to be more mindful of her energy. Her eyes drew up to the sky. It was nearly sunhigh. It would begin soon.

"Do you think I'll pass?" She asked cautiously.

"Of course you will," Toadpaw replied with a confident swish of his tail. "You've caught up with all the training you missed, there's no way they'll keep you as an apprentice for *another* two moons."

Silverpaw nodded slowly. "I hope you're right," she murmured, staring off towards the willow tree.

Inside the den, Honeywhisker, Salmonskip, and Pinestar were speaking to each other. If she peered closely enough, she swore she could see their pelts shifting around in the darkness, but she couldn't be certain.

Suddenly, Salmonskip crawled out from between the gnarled roots. Silverpaw's breath caught in her throat as his orange eyes roamed the clearing, somehow finding her amid the shrubbery, while Honeywhisker trailed a few paces behind him.

The two toms strode towards her.

"I don't think I'm ready," Silverpaw whispered, backing deeper into the shadows.

"Sure you are!" Mistpaw coiled her tail around hers. "Go show them how great of a warrior you can be."

Toadpaw's cheek brushed hers. "You're more ready than anyone. You deserve this," he vowed, confidence thickening his tone. He peeled away and held her gaze, warmth swimming in his eyes.

"Are you ready, Silverpaw?" Salmonskip lowered his head to peer past the branches.

Swallowing her anxiety, Silverpaw crawled out, her tail twitching behind her. "I... I suppose I am."

"Good, then let us begin." Salmonskip inclined his head politely.

"Follow me."

Giving a nervous nod, Silverpaw glanced back at her friends one final time. They both gave her glowing smiles. Toadpaw's gaze followed her until she was out of sight, while his sister trailed alongside the silver tabby, stopping at the camp entrance to wave her tail in an animated farewell.

The water level was astoundingly high, the riverbank nearly touching the reed-woven barrier that defended the camp. The crossing stones were hidden beneath the water, forcing the warriors to wade across. Though it was cold, it was no longer angry as it had been during the storms, simply rolling along noisily and with a persistent speed.

Reaching the other bank, Silverpaw's fur was dripping. She shivered, fluffing out her pelt, only to wince as a fresh droplet of icy water splattered above her brow, swiftly climbing in number as it began to rain.

Without comment, Honeywhisker bushed out his fur and slipped into the forest. Silverpaw moved to follow him, but Salmonskip drew a paw across her path.

"He'll spectate you in secret," the tabby mewed quietly.

Silverpaw nodded, and the gray tom continued to lead her through the forest. Their journey was in silence, merely interrupted by the growing patter of rain. As time dragged on, the apprentice's thoughts roamed to Owlpaw. He would've passed the assessment, no questions asked. He was talented in every field, always bringing back mighty hauls of prey and surpassing his Clanmates in battle training.

He could even hold his own against Salmonskip, she recalled sadly, studying the deputy's well-muscled form. *I could never do that. I'm far too weak.*

"We're here," Salmonskip announced, drawing to a halt. "Hunt as much prey as you can. Your mentor will study your skills and report back to me to determine whether or not you're ready to be a

warrior. Good luck."

Silverpaw watched as the gray tabby turned around and, she assumed, began the return to camp. She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment to steel herself. There was little noise in the forest today, especially underneath the rainfall. She reopened her eyes to study her surroundings. The lakeshore was just beyond the trees; it had also risen in level, and had begun to creep into the forest. Its water was dark and murky, ominous in its own right.

She parted her jaws and breathed in. The tastes of the forest unfolded before her and bled into her lungs, though the smells were muted behind the overwhelming taste of fresh rain. Faintly, she could detect the dense flavor of a flooded river, and behind it, the smell of windswept grass. She must be near the Horseplace border, which meant the Training Pool would be a fair walk behind her.

She contemplated her options for a short while, keeping her attention tuned to her surroundings. *The Training Pool is for apprentices,* she conceded. *If I want to prove I can be a warrior, I should hunt elsewhere.*

With a decisive flick of her tail, she trudged onward, hugging the trunks of trees and keeping her pawsteps delicate, both in hopes to keep warm and hidden from potential prey. Still, coldness crept deep under her fur and into her bones, resulting in the faint chatter of her teeth.

Though she knew Honeywhisker was watching her from somewhere within the trees, the prospect of being alone so near to a border set her fur on end. She couldn't recall a time when she had been. Even on her nightly escapades, she never set foot past the clifftop, too afraid of the thought of running into a bloodthirsty rogue.

Her worries dwindled away as she found herself by the river. She crept towards its edge. Blades of grass poked out from the flooded banks, and even deeper she could see the reaching arms of bushes completely submerged. She waded into the dark shallows, hardly able to see a whisker-length beneath the surface.

She stood there for a while until she realized that no fish would

swim up to her, and with a lash of her tail, she crawled out of the murky mess and back onto land. She followed the river upstream until it bent away, and she continued on her way towards the border.

She opened her mouth and drank in the scents on the air. She could smell nothing. It wasn't far-fetched to assume most of the land's prey had huddled up inside their burrows to shelter from the ice-cold rain, much to her chagrin.

A few flakes of bark tumbled from above, and Silverpaw flinched away, her eyes darting to a squirrel peering down at her from the forest canopy. It chattered angrily at her, not even a spark of fear in its beady eyes. She scoffed. Even a measly rodent knew that RiverClan cats refused to climb trees. She bared her teeth irritably, and with a whisk of its fuzzy tail, it flung another piece of bark at her.

Annoyance grew under her pelt as she continued on, twitching her ears. As she grew nearer to the horseplace border, strange twoleg smells wafted through her nostrils. She inhaled deeply. Her attention was snatched by the light, grassy scent of a rabbit. She narrowed her eyes. It was fresh.

Dropping into a smooth stalk, Silverpaw slunk forward, her paws drawn closely together and her tail hovering just above the ground. She skirted around a cluster of dead leaves, and precariously stepped over a fragile branch. The treeline entered her sight after a few minutes of painfully slow stalking. Her eyes slitted further as she peered out into the open field, clouds of rain swallowing the distant horizon. Long locks of grass rippled in the heavy moorland wind.

The scentline towered before her in an invisible wall of smell, and as she surveyed the land beyond, she spotted her prey hopping between tussocks of grass. Its fuzzy white tail bobbed up and down. She lifted a paw, and left it quivering just barely a claw-length above the scentline.

Heartbeats passed as temptation gnawed at her heart. The rabbit was right there, oblivious to her presence, and visibly plump.

Sighing reluctantly, Silverpaw drew her paw back to her chest, and she rose from her crouch. The rabbit spotted her movement, and immediately disappeared into the ocean of golden grass. *I can't break the warrior code. I'd be no better than ShadowClan,* she scolded herself. She turned around and returned to the shadows of RiverClan's woods.

Tipping her nose to the air, she tested for more prey-scent. She continued to stray in proximity to the border, but gradually dipped deeper into her territory as the smell of prey escaped her.

Finally, the soft, woodsy aroma of a mouse tickled her scent glands, and she honed in on it. Her paws prickled with anticipation as she tracked the scent further and further along. As she drew closer, she realized that it wasn't just one mouse; she could smell multiple, cloaked beneath the scent of warmth and twigs. *It's a nest of them,* she presumed eagerly.

On bated breath, she wove around trees and dense undergrowth until at last, she picked up the faintest of squeaks through the flush of rain. She twitched her ears and followed the noise to a dense thicket. Mouse droppings lay scattered about, and the leaflitter was scuffed by tiny pawmarks. She studied the ensemble of bushes. Deep within, barely visible through the thick maze of branches, she could see the cleverly knitted twigs, leaves, and featherdown of a mouse nest.

She sat there thoughtfully, and an idea sparked in her mind. Backing carefully out of the brush, she looked around. *There.* She gripped a branch between her teeth and hefted it up. With a swing of her shoulders, she tossed the limb towards the bush. It crashed upon the thicket, violently shuddering the leaves. Shrill squeals of terror erupted from within the nest.

Dropping immediately into a crouch, she struggled to keep her tail from lashing. Mice scrambled to escape the confines of their nest, darting out in all directions. Silverpaw flicked out a paw and smacked a mouse before it could escape her, and she dragged it close to rapidly dispatch it. Another flew past. She snagged it by its tail and hooked it towards her, but before she could snap its neck, another shot by. She managed to scoop it up with her teeth, and

swiftly she ended the lives of the final two mice.

Her breathing accelerated, Silverpaw pricked her ears and returned her attention to the nest, keenly listening for the scuffle of more paws. No more noise greeted her. With a content twitch of her whiskers, she dug a hole to hide her catch, but realized that the earth was too damp for the safe storage of prey.

Picking up her fresh-kill by the tails, she looked around. She spotted a rather low hole in a tree trunk. She padded over, rearing onto her hind legs to reach the cavity. She leaned forward and placed the mice inside, where she hoped no predators would find them.

Silverpaw dropped back to the ground to continue her meandering. She traveled a fair distance, nose to the air as she sought out new scents, but nothing fresh would greet her. Raindrops spattered uncomfortably against her nose, and her body began to tremble from the cold. She fluffed out her pelt once again in a feeble attempt to fight the cold, but regardless of her efforts, she could feel her skin growing numb.

"Your time is up."

Silverpaw whirled around in surprise. Honeywhisker emerged from the undergrowth.

"Did I do all right?" She mewed tentatively, standing taller.

"That will be discussed with Salmonskip," Honeywhisker said. "Go fetch your mice and bring them back to camp, I'll meet you there."

Silverpaw nodded slowly. "Okay."

Honeywhisker stared at her for a brief moment, then he turned around and began the trek back to camp. Silverpaw retraced her steps to the tree, and as she grew closer, she caught a flash of movement.

Alarm sparked through her pelt and she dropped to a crouch, moving carefully, yet swiftly through the undergrowth until she could get a clear view on the hollow. She rose taller as she noticed the rear of a white and gray she-cat, the rest of her inside of the

tree-trunk where the mice were stored. Indignation burned beneath the apprentice's skin, and she rose from her stalk with a lash of her tail.

"Hey!" Silverpaw shouted, putting on a burst of speed. "That's my fresh-kill, get away!"

The strange she-cat struggled. Her shoulders, visibly stuck, thrashed as she kicked her hind claws against the bark of the tree, pelting a spray of splinters at Silverpaw's face. The apprentice snarled just as she popped free, stumbling to the ground with three mouse-tails swinging from her jaw.

Silverpaw backed away a few paces, immediately testing the air. *Not one of the rogues,* she realized in relief, her confidence growing. In fact, the she-cat's scent was so faint, she could hardly distinguish it. "Those are my mice, give them back."

"*Your* mice?" The she-cat spat, dropping them carelessly to the ground. Her lip curled as her eyes burned over Silverpaw's scars. "I found them, fair and square, flesh-face."

Silverpaw hackles rose. "Found them? I *caught* them! You're stealing *and* trespassing." A growl rolled from her chest as the wind shifted in her direction, bringing more clarity to the stranger's smell. Faintly, she could pick up the scent of hay and dust. *A horseplace cat. She should have plenty of mice in her barn, so why is she hunting here?* The realization only made her angrier, and she took a threatening step forward. "You'd better give those back and leave now, or you'll regret ever stepping on RiverClan land."

The white and gray she-cat bristled, a flash of understanding in her eyes. "River*Clan,"* she muttered. "You're a Clan cat."

Silverpaw lifted her head boldly. "Of course I am. Didn't you smell the border?"

The rogue's blue eyes flashed in an expression Silverpaw couldn't pinpoint, and she backed a step away, her gray-striped tail sweeping up to cuff her haunches. "I apologize, I must not've noticed it."

Before Silverpaw could respond, the she-cat turned tail and bolted away, leaving the three mice crumpled sadly on the forest floor, collecting rainwater in their soft coats.

Silverpaw's eyes followed her until she passed over the border. With a disgruntled huff, she picked up her prey. Though now soaked and cold, they still tasted delicious. *It'll have to do,* she thought unhappily, lashing her tail and stomping back to camp.

Chapter Sixteen

[image]

The river hadn't risen much since she'd left for her assessment, but Silverpaw felt worry gnaw at her chest as she splashed through shallow water up until the camp entrance. The camp guard, Aspentail, smiled uneasily at her from inside, and the apprentice noticed an unusual buzz of activity within the rain-soaked clearing.

"What are we supposed to do if the territory floods and we have rogues waiting beyond our borders?" Crowspots hissed, a surprising amount of hostility lacing her tone.

"The camp won't flood," Pinestar reassured calmly. "And if it does, we have enough cats to fend off any perpetrators beyond our border."

Lightfern's yellow eyes shone anxiously. "But isn't it wrong to chase cats off the land they've been living on?"

Quietoak flattened her ears, looking at the younger she-cat with wide eyes. "You don't pity them, do you?"

Lightfern fluffed out her chest. "They may have trespassed, but Silverpaw could've been lying about what they did." She glanced towards the camp entrance where the apprentice stood frozen, and she bared her teeth. "We've all heard what Lionpoppy says. Who better knows a cat than their own mother?"

A murmur spread through the clearing. Most of the Clan had gathered near the outskirts, having taken shelter from the storm while they curiously listened in on the argument. Silverpaw felt dread pool in her belly. Just how many of her own Clanmates believed her to have directly murdered her brother? The mere idea brought the faint, acrid tang of bile to the back of her tongue.

"That's enough of this nonsense." Wishfern emerged from her den, her feathery white fur weighed down by rain, her amber eyes sharp.

"All of you, let Pinestar be with your hypotheticals. If an evacuation is needed, he will evacuate us. I'll make sure of it." Her gaze swept her Clan. "And you'd best forget your gossip about Silverpaw, as you should have moons ago. *I* treated her injuries, and *I* saw the fur beneath her claws. None of it belonged to her brother."

Lionpoppy growled from the shadows of the warrior's den, backing swiftly into the darkness. No other voices dared to protest Wishfern's authority.

Whisking his tail, Pinestar slipped into his den without further comment. The Clan gradually dispersed, but Silverpaw couldn't avoid the scrutinizing gazes of skeptics. She awkwardly made her way to the fresh-kill pile, depositing her mice, before stepping away with an uncertain weight to her steps.

"Look at that!" Mistpaw *mrrow'*ed, darting up beside her. "Three mice. Think that'll be enough to pass?"

Silverpaw grimaced. "I sure hope so. This weather didn't make it easy."

Toadpaw rolled his eyes. "I'm certain it's enough. Quit stressing her, Mistpaw."

Indignantly, the dark apprentice puffed out her chest. "I'm not stressing her!" More meekly, she glanced at Silverpaw. "Am I?"

Silverpaw shook her head.

"See?" Mistpaw stuck her tongue out. Toadpaw shoved her in response.

"Think we have time to eat something?" Toadpaw asked, pushing his sister away as she tried batting him over the head.

"I'm not sure if I'd be able to stomach anything while I wait," Silverpaw chuckled, her tail flicking uncomfortably. Though she hadn't eaten all day, it was true. Nerves rattled relentlessly in her stomach.

"We wouldn't have the time to, anyways. Look!" Mistpaw, having

forgotten her feeble assault, angled her ears towards the leader's den.

Silverpaw followed her gaze, her heart stopping in her throat as Honeywhisker, Salmonskip, and Pinestar all emerged from between the roots of the sprawling willow tree. Honeywhisker slipped away to the outskirts of the clearing, joining Minnowstripe where she lounged beneath some ferns, while Salmonskip briefly caught Silverpaw's eye.

Did I pass?

As if the tom heard her question, his lip twitched into a faint smile, and his gaze drew back towards Pinestar. The leader gathered his haunches beneath him and launched upon the mossy boulder. There wasn't any news in the Clan, other than her assessment and the rising river, but the calmness in his posture dismissed the latter. Excitement spurred in her paws, and naturally, she found herself moving closer to the meetingplace.

Sitting down and curling her tail primly over her paws, Silverpaw attentively watched as Pinestar released a summoning yowl.

"May all cats old enough to swim against the current gather around for a Clan meeting!"

The warriors who hadn't retreated to their dens remained where they were, while the rest emerged from their comfortable shelter, wincing against the beating rain. Silverpaw's eyes roamed the cats, searching for familiar golden eyes, only for her heart to wrench as she recalled the absence of both her mentor and brother.

Owlpaw. What would this moment be like if he was by her side? And her mentor, watching proudly from beside Lionpoppy, two friends unseparated since their youth? She felt grief claw up her throat like the venom of a snake, ready to spill over in a foaming demise. Her mother would have helped her groom her fur, perhaps adorned her ear with a flower as her parents had done for her own ceremony. But alas, it was a tradition forgotten alongside their kinship. Along with the tragedy of Owlpaw's demise.

Silverpaw swallowed her tears, stilling her trembling whiskers and instead placating herself with a forced smile. She would accept her ceremony with pride and gratitude, not regrets. It was a day to be celebrated. If she wanted to mourn, she could mourn later.

More encouraging was the brush of fur against hers. The reassuring smiles of her friends alighted upon her, their bodies pressed close. Even Lichenpaw had returned in time to witness her ceremony, her frustrated gaze melting away to excitement as she trotted over to join her siblings.

Straightening her posture, Silverpaw lifted her head high.

"Today, we will be welcoming a new warrior into our ranks. A cat who has been through so much hardship for one so young." Pinestar dipped his head, his eyes shining in a mixture of sorrow and pride. "Silverpaw, please come forward."

After a moment of hesitation, Silverpaw stepped towards her leader. One paw at a time, she drew nearer, her stomach coiling with anxious excitement. The eyes of the entire Clan followed her, every cat assembled for the moment that would mark her greatest success.

"I, Pinestar, leader of RiverClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look upon this apprentice. She has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend her to you as a warrior in her turn."

With a flick of his tail, he indicated for her to stop. She did, immediately halting in her tracks, her eyes not leaving him. Pinestar dropped from the mossy boulder. In a single stride, he stood before the silver tabby, his green eyes glowing with wisdom beyond his years.

"Silverpaw," he continued softly, "do you promise to uphold the warrior code, and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your own life?"

"I do," Silverpaw responded immediately. A slight shiver crept into her voice, but she held her head high.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I grant you your warrior name. Silverpaw, from this day onward, you will be known as Silverjaw. StarClan honors your loyalty and perseverance, and we welcome you as a full warrior of RiverClan.

Silverpaw—no, Silverjaw—bowed her head as Pinestar leaned forward. He pressed his nose between her ears, and in turn, she gave his damp shoulder a respectful lick. The leader backed away, inclining his head, and raised his tail high over his spine.

The Clan erupted into cheers. *"Silverjaw! Silverjaw! Silverjaw!"*

Joy swirled in her heart. She turned to face her Clanmates, familiar faces all crowing her new name. Cats who shunned her even joined in the clamor, unable to resist the joyous moment. The only one whose muzzle remained tightly shut was Lionpoppy. Immediately, Silverjaw's confidence waned, instead replaced by a swirl of hurt. The hatred in Lionpoppy's amber eyes burned like a raging inferno.

Silverjaw breathed a shuddering breath, closing her eyes. She swallowed her pain, and when she reopened them, she refused to look her mother's way.

Once the cheers abated, cats clustered around her, uttering congratulations and snippets of small talk. Even those who'd vocalized their dislike for her mere minutes ago, such as Lightfern, met her with praise. It was almost uncomfortable, and she wasn't certain if the overwhelming support was genuine or fake.

Most surprising, however, was Honeywhisker. "I knew you'd do it," the golden tom mewed proudly, Minnowstripe by his side.

Silverjaw stiffened in shock. "Thank you...?"

Minnowstripe smiled between the two, her expression glowing. Honeywhisker dipped his head politely, and the pair walked away.

As the commotion began to die down, a chipper voice erupted beside her ear, "Congratulations, Silverjaw!" Pigeonpaw wriggled up next to the freshly appointed warrior, his tail lashing eagerly behind him.

"Thank you," Silverjaw purred.

The little tom grinned. "Don't tell Lionpoppy, but I knew you were too awesome to fail your assessment." He glanced over his shoulders, where the aforementioned cat was standing impatiently by the camp entrance, a furious scowl furrowed between her brow. The little tom shrank. "Anyways... I'd better go. She wants me for some battle practice!"

"Okay," Silverjaw chuckled, nosing him along. "Have fun."

"I will!"

A smile crept up to Silverjaw's face as she watched Pigeonpaw scurry to his mentor's side. She tore her eyes quickly away, not wanting to give Lionpoppy the satisfaction to linger, and found herself face-to-face with Mistpaw. Her friend's green eyes shone.

"I'm so proud of you!" Mistpaw squealed, pressing her body tightly against Silverjaw's, forcefully twining her tail. "I'll miss you so much, so you'd better keep a nest warm for me, okay?" She jabbed a paw against the silver tabby's shoulder. "I'll be joining you soon enough."

"Ow—*ow!* Okay, I'll be sure to," Silverjaw yelped, wriggling free of the dark she-cat's vice-like grip.

Toadpaw chuckled and cut between them as Mistpaw lunged again, blocking his sister's access. "Let's get you some prey to celebrate," he purred. Warmly, his green eyes fell upon Silverjaw's. "Congratulations, by the way."

"That's a great idea," Lichenpaw softly piped in.

A warm cloud of happiness swirled around the quartet as they worked their way towards the fresh-kill pile. It was disappointing in size, each item of prey soaked through and cold, but Silverjaw eyed a tasty trout among the remains, prompting her tongue to rasp across her muzzle.

"Not so fast," Pinestar interrupted from behind the group. "Silverjaw still needs to do her silent vigil. The three of you, on the other paw,

are expected to hunt with your mentors." He swayed his tail towards the camp entrance, where Minnowstripe, Crowspots, and Nightpatch had gathered.

"Oh. Sorry, Silverjaw," Lichenpaw murmured sadly.

As she begrudgingly padded away, Mistpaw turned her eyes to Pinestar, jutting her chin. "Why can't we stay in camp today?" She demanded. "It's so cold and wet, we may as well lie in our nests until the warm weather returns. We won't catch anything like this!"

Pinestar's green eyes narrowed. "An attitude like that shows that you need more experience in unpleasant conditions," he growled. "Leaf-bare is fast approaching, and it will remain cold for the rest of the season. We can't stop providing for the Clan because of mere *laziness."* His tone was as harsh and unforgiving as the rain.

Mistpaw gaped.

"Come on, Mistpaw," Toadpaw muttered awkwardly. "You can't be arguing with the leader like that."

"But—"

Toadpaw nipped her ear, shutting her up. Apologetically glancing between Silverjaw and Pinestar, he led his sister away.

Pinestar sighed, a small smile curling his lips as the two disappeared from sight. "Now," he began, turning his gaze to Silverjaw, "as is tradition, you must take your stand by the camp entrance. Watch vigilantly and ensure no intruders enter," he paused. "And congratulations. Sorrelmouse would be proud."

Without another word, Pinestar swished his tail and padded towards the elder's den where Swimleap and Dappledfang reinforced its walls.

Silverjaw's heart lurched, a sudden heaviness falling over her. *Sorrelmouse.* Her nostrils flared and she sucked in a breath, yet again pushing the thought of her mentor's absence to the back of her mind. She fluffed out her pelt, and twitching the tip of her tail, she hurried to the camp entrance. She dismissed Aspentail and

settled down just within the walls, ducked beneath a cluster of tightly entangled branches. They concealed her from the eyes of cats beyond, but gave her the perfect view.

The rest of the day passed swiftly enough. Clanmates came and went, dipping their heads to her as they passed. She sat in a stoic silence, her ears pricked and alert for intruders. Eventually, Mistpaw, Toadpaw, Lichenpaw, and their mentors came trotting back, carrying sparse prey between them. A massive hare dangled between Crowspots and Toadpaw, big enough to feed the whole Clan.

Mistpaw caught Silverjaw's questioning stare. "It wandered over the border, right into Toadpaw's paws!" She exclaimed. "Isn't that exciting?"

Minnowstripe cuffed the black she-cat over the ears. "Hush now," she scolded. "Silverjaw can't speak during her vigil." She shot an apologetic glance to the silver warrior, urging the apprentice into camp.

As the sun descended, the temperature fell with it. Silverjaw had thought it was cold before, but now, she wished for the chilly rain and light breeze to return. Replacing it was a howling wind that tore through the trees and stabbed into her fur. She tucked her paws under her belly in a desperate attempt to keep them warm as the rain transitioned into sleet.

Then, as the shadows grew long and the light began to wane, a little white particle swirled past her.

Silverjaw rose slowly to her paws, golden eyes round and curious. She backed out of her shelter, watching in wonder as a few more flakes swirled down from the sky, intermingled with sleet. She reached out a paw and batted at a little speck of white as it whisked down, only a whisker-length away from her.

Her eyes stretched wider as she studied her surroundings, watching as the sleet quickly began to transition. It looked as though the sky were freeing white specks of pollen, but as the gold substance settled on her fur, she recognized it for what it was. *Snow.* She'd

been too young as a kit to recognize the wintry world she'd been born into, so to her recollection, this was a first.

If only Owlpaw were here, she thought with a twang in her heart. *He'd be thrilled.*

From inside the camp, Silverjaw could hear the eager squeals of Pigeonpaw and Finchpaw, rapidly overwhelmed by Toadpaw and Mistpaw's bickering. She could picture Lichenpaw among the chaos, quietly appreciating the beautiful weather. After all, this was their first snow, too.

Darkness befell the forest. The light swirls of snow gradually increased in quantity until Silverjaw was reduced to a wall of shadowed white. Her teeth chattered, and she lay huddled against the camp wall, bracing herself against the cold.

Smothered in clouds of snow, the thoughts she'd done her best to hide erupted full-force into her mind. She could feel her brother beside her, his breath hissing into her ear with the wind. Was he angry? Was he happy? She couldn't tell, and a shiver wracked her body.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, clenching her teeth tight. "You should be here with me. We should be warriors together."

The words were worthless. She knew, deep down, that he wouldn't care what she said. How much she apologized, how much she begged for him. She could only see his fear, twisted in an anger that plagued her dreams, no matter how hard she tried to forget. And Sorrelmouse... all she could feel from her was regret. Sadness. Betrayal, even.

The slightest crunch of footsteps against snow rose past the roaring wind.

Silverjaw staggered to her paws, adrenaline pumping through her veins and sending her heart galloping. She swiveled her ears around in a panic, struggling to pinpoint the direction. Was it the rogues? She snarled, her claws spreading against the layers of snow, until at last she spotted a figure.

Barely visible past the swirling snow, from within the camp's walls, she could make out Salmonskip's dark tabby stripes. Her panic receded into a calm, and she smoothed her hackles, exhaling sharply through her nose.

"You look cold," Salmonskip acknowledged. "You're relieved of your watch. Go get yourself a nest and some sleep."

Silverjaw merely stared at the tom for a moment, her mind blurred from the cold. "I—" she stumbled, and the tom pressed up against her side, catching her before she could fall. "Th-Thank you."

"Easy does it," he mewed gently.

The deputy guided her carefully into camp, stumbling across the clearing until Silverjaw's whiskers brushed against woven reeds.

"Go on," Salmonskip urged. "I'll be taking over now."

Silverjaw nodded numbly, easing into the darkness. Immediately, stale warmth pressed around her. She glanced down at herself; icicles tipped the lower half of her belly fur, while the top of her pelt was layered white with snow. Mindful of her sleeping Clanmates, she shook out her pelt.

Exhausted was an understatement as she stumbled across the den. Her eyes darted around in search of an empty nest, and at last, she found one in the far corners of the den, barely fitted into a tiny nook. She sniffed it gingerly. It was fresh and mostly untouched, bare of any decorations, any feathers, but it was the most comfortable thing she could even imagine in her state. Even better, it had clearly been made just for her.

With a groan, she collapsed into the fresh bedding, swamped by darkness before her head could even hit the moss.

Chapter Seventeen

[image]

A sheet of white blanketed the camp, unbroken except for a trail of pawsteps leading from the warrior's den to the camp entrance. From behind a snow-laden thicket, Silverjaw was twisted over her back, lapping at her spine while she waited for Wishfern's final check-up.

Being out in the cold for too long, turns out, had its consequences. Silverjaw had been wracked with a horrific illness for a quarter-moon now, and at last, she was feeling more like herself. During her time in the medicine den, however, her mind had been stuck to its own devices. She relived the deaths of Owlpaw and Sorrelmouse countless times, nearly every moment she shut her eyes. Particularly, though, her thoughts had lingered on the rogues and Pinestar's speculation that they had hidden their scent. She shuddered, her claws scraping at the mangled edge of her nest yet again.

What motive could they possibly have? Yes, they were evil, but there was no way in StarClan that they'd have *wanted* a cat to follow them into the forest... right?

She shook her head and pushed the thoughts into the deepest crevices of her mind. Fortunately, Lichenpaw, Mistpaw, and most often, Toadpaw accompanied her stay—at a distance, as Wishfern proclaimed her illness might be contagious. Having other cats to talk to had been her saving grace. Otherwise, she was certain she would've gone mad.

Shuffling around in the far nooks of the medicine den, Wishfern shoved a bundle of herbs into the shelf. She turned around and leaped carefully over a small sheen of ice; the once bubbling stream now frozen over. She moved forward a few more paces and touched her nose to Silverjaw's.

"Your fever has subsided," Wishfern declared as she pulled away. "How's your voice feeling?"

"My throat doesn't hurt anymore," Silverjaw mewed clearly.

"Good." Wishfern's feathery tail flicked thoughtfully. "You may return to your duties, but I suggest you take care of how long you're in the cold for. You're lucky you didn't catch whitecough."

Silverjaw nodded agreeably. She was glad she hadn't introduced whitecough—the lesser version of the more deadly greencough—to the Clan. Her stay in the medicine den had made her painfully aware of their lack of catmint, the only cure to the terrible ailment.

"Thank you again, Wishfern." Silverjaw brushed past the white-furred medicine cat, casting her a small smile.

Wishfern twitched an ear. "Don't bother thanking me," she dismissed, returning to her herb store. "I'm just doing my job."

Silverjaw flicked her whiskers in amusement at the now-familiar phrase, slipping out of the thicket and into the clearing. The air was crisp and cold, stinging at her lungs as she inhaled, but regardless of the piercing bite, the smells of leaf-bare refreshed her after her long stay in the medicine den's stale atmosphere.

Her eyes flitted about the clearing. The camp was mostly empty. Salmonskip's ringed tail disappeared just beyond the camp entrance, a small patrol trailing him. Nearby, Paledusk nosed his way into the warrior's den, before backing out with Robinleap at his rear.

"Feeling better already?" The light gray tom mewed, approaching the silver warrior.

"As healthy as a kit," Silverjaw replied with a smile.

"Perfect. Would you join us on a hunting patrol? An extra set of paws would be helpful."

"Absolutely," Silverjaw purred. "I really need to stretch my legs."

Paledusk nodded. Swishing his tail, he led his fellow warriors out of camp. Beyond the protection of the walls, the air was much colder. Silverjaw fluffed out her fur and shivered, her eyes straying to the river.

The shore had developed a light sheen of ice, broken where paws had stepped, but otherwise suffocating bits of grass and reeds that struggled to break free. The river, still much higher than it should be, had shrunk by a few margins since their first snow, the water no longer reaching inside the camp. Still, the height at which it had settled made Silverjaw wary. Would it rise again after the first snowmelt?

The cats swiftly crossed to the other side of the river. The snow was light and powdery where dozens of paws had already trampled it down. The patrol diverted from the typical path, falling into deeper, untouched snow as they slipped away from the river. It took a serious effort to push through, and Silverjaw began to dread the sore muscles she'd be greeted with in the evening.

"What are we hoping to catch?" She inquired. "Land or river prey?"

Paledusk thought for a moment. "River prey," he decided. "I'm sick of eating fur."

"Maybe we'll catch something big," Robinleap piped in, rasping his tongue over his lips with a glint to his eyes. "Perhaps a bass."

A river gradually came into sight. It was the same one Silverjaw had crossed with Toadpaw when she had been ordered to test the rogue scent. It was still overwhelming its banks, but it was much calmer than before, gliding along at a sluggish pace while slabs of ice lazily drifted downstream.

Paledusk reeled the patrol to a slow stop on the bank. He swished his tail and waded in. Silverjaw followed quickly after, her heartbeat rising in eager anticipation. This was her first hunt as a warrior!

Her paws crushed through the fringes of ice. She winced as the freezing water swept over her paws, gritting her teeth.

"Wishfern is going to kill me," she muttered, recalling the medicine cat's warning against the cold.

Paledusk tossed a sly grin over his shoulder. "Not if she doesn't catch you."

Silverjaw let out a soft *mrrow* as she waded deeper. She pushed against the shore, her feet flying aloft. Her paws paddled as water washed over her spine, clutching her in its ice-cold grip. She clenched her teeth against the biting chill.

"Do you see any fish over there?" She called out to Robinleap, who'd walked further upstream.

"Not yet, but I see *something* that'll be worth our while!"

The reddish tom splashed loudly into the river. Silverjaw's ears flattened against her head, and she squinted upstream. An alarmed squawk cut the air. With a lithe kick, the silver warrior pushed forward to see what it was.

Bobbing along the surface of the water was a duck, streaming straight for the shallows.

"Coming your way!" Robinleap shouted from behind, rapidly losing ground on the swift bird.

Lowering her head, Silverjaw kept her nose and eyes hardly above the surface, paddling quickly towards the shore until her paws barely skimmed the ground. She slipped forward, ever-so-slightly, until her feet were solidly pressed against the earth. Her ears flat and chin in the water, she watched the duck as it fled nearer to her.

Just a little closer, she prompted, adrenaline rising to a pulsing beat in her veins.

Then, Silverjaw lunged.

The duck shrieked and wildly flapped its snow-white wings as the silver tabby appeared from the river, her claws outstretched and closing around its feathered body. It was a fierce struggle, and the two rolled underwater. Silverjaw fought the wild bird, pushing through the pain as its wings battered her head and its webbed talons slashed against her skin. Eventually, in a stroke of luck, she

overpowered it, her teeth closing around its windpipe. She held tight as its life bled away.

At last, its struggles ebbed to nothing. Silverjaw used her hindlegs to propel herself from the ground, bursting to the surface. She drank lungfuls of air into her aching chest. She dragged the limp bird to the shore, dropping it onto the snow-covered bank. She stepped away, dropping to her haunches to survey her catch, a bird nearly as large as her.

My first prey as a warrior! She thought happily, lifting her head. Her heart twisted as she regretfully thought of her brother, but for once, she found a sliver of warmth as she recalled his face.

She stiffened as she caught the faintest whiff of his scent, brief enough that she couldn't tell if it was real or not. Was he enjoying the moment with her, watching from StarClan? Maybe, just maybe, he was happy for her.

"Nicely done," Robinleap praised, nudging her side. She jolted, whipping around to face him. "I was certain it would escape."

Silverjaw blinked, losing her train of thought. "I was able to catch it thanks to your heads up," she argued, flicking her tail against his flank.

Robinleap shrugged dismissively, dipping back into the river. Once she'd caught her breath, Silverjaw followed suit, and the patrol continued on their hunt.

❀

The duck bumped against her legs as Silverjaw struggled to drag it back into camp. Her lower fur was battered with light scratches and dried blood from her tussle with her prey, but it was nothing she couldn't survive. The bird itself was wet from its journey across the crossing stones, but still remained fresh, the lukewarm blood teasing her tastebuds. She dropped it into the fresh-kill pile with a sigh. It was monstrous among the rest of the patrol's feeble catch of the day; a minnow and a small salmon.

Although the rivers provided well during the cold season, it was clear that fish was more populous during new-leaf and green-leaf. If the hunting patrols remained so disappointing, Silverjaw was certain her Clanmates would grow noticeably thinner.

"Robinleap and I are heading out to hunt some more," Paledusk mewed, as if reading Silverjaw's thoughts. "Would you like to join us?"

Silverjaw brightened, but hesitated and shook her head. "I'd better warm up a bit, lest I catch a cold again. Wishfern will rip my tail off if she finds me with another cough."

Paledusk chuckled. "Suit yourself."

Silverjaw turned to study the camp as the two toms swiftly left.

There were few cats occupying the clearing. As was becoming the new usual, the warriors were run thin and tired, giving them little time to relax. They were either sent to mark the borders to keep rogues and ShadowClan at bay, or to hunt for their scarce prey-pile. In fact, Dappledfang had collapsed from exhaustion just the day prior, and was now dragging a scrawny fish to the warrior's den where Wishfern had condemned him. Heatfur, the only other warrior in camp, sat guard at the entrance, visibly comfortable in her solitude.

After a moment's pause, Silverjaw meandered over to the elders. Ravenfire, Sandytail, and Nightfur chatted softly near some bulrush by their den, discussing the 'good old days' from under the rule of Bubblestar. Silverjaw found herself enjoying the conversation, wishing she had lived in their times where there was no war against ShadowClan, no harsh leaf-bare, and no "flea-bitten rogue scum", as Sandytail put it.

"My grandkits will be joining you soon enough," Ravenfire purred with a gleam to her eyes. "Toadpaw has been talking my ear off about how excited he is to share a den with you again."

Silverjaw offered a soft laugh, unsure of how she was meant to respond.

Eventually, she bode the talkative cats farewell, fetching a small trout from the fresh-kill pile to portion with Heatfur.

"What's Finchpaw up to? Has her training been going well?" She asked.

Heatfur nodded, taking a bite out of the fish. "She's doing wonderfully. She's full of energy and is a quick learner, but she sprained her paw this morning, so we're taking a few days to rest." Her whiskers flicked brightly. "I already caught her a few times trying to train, so now she's confined to Wishfern's care."

Silverjaw purred in amusement. "Wishfern lets nothing slide."

"Exactly," Heatfur mewed passionately. "And we're lucky it wasn't a break. She'd be devastated."

Silverjaw nodded. "Especially so early into training. How'd it happen, anyways?"

"She slipped on some ice at the Training Pool." The ginger warrior's tufted ear flicked, and she tilted her head. "Did you hear that?"

Silverjaw pricked her ears and held her breath. After a heartbeat, the pounding of frantic pawsteps greeted her ears, following by little splashes as a cat flew across the crossing stones. She inhaled deeply. The iron tang of blood filled her lungs.

"What—"

Lichenpaw exploded through the reed barrier, her eyes wild and frantic. Silverjaw stepped back to avoid the apprentice crashing into her, but she darted a paw forward to catch the black she-cat's attention. Stumbling to a halt, Lichenpaw's blue eyes spun to the silver warrior.

"Great StarClan! What's the matter, Lichenpaw?" Silverjaw exclaimed, her gaze roving over the panting she-cat. Lichenpaw was covered in bloody scratches, and her ear was entirely missing, blood oozing into her wide blue eyes.

"Rogues," Lichenpaw hissed, fear dripping like acid from her tongue and spreading venomously to Silverjaw. "Our patrol was ambushed. We need reinforcements, and fast." Her eyes flickered around the vacant camp. Only the elders stared back at her. Ravenfire was already moving towards the group of warriors.

"Where is everybody?" The apprentice pressed.

"They're... they're all out patrolling," Silverjaw realized with growing dread.

"Lichenpaw, are you all right?" Ravenfire demanded, giving the apprentice a quick sniff.

"No, Ravenfire! My patrol needs help!"

"I can't go," Heatfur said quietly. "We need somebody here to guard the camp."

Ravenfire snorted, whisking her tail towards Sandytail and Crowspots. "We may be old, but we're not helpless. We can defend the camp just fine. I'm not letting my granddaughter run into battle without an experienced warrior by her side." She bared her teeth, tilting her head up so she could glare at the towering warrior.

Heatfur dipped her head.

Lichenpaw blinked gratefully, then turned her attention to Silverjaw, her tail lashing anxiously. "And you?"

"Of course she's going," Ravenfire snapped indignantly. She turned her wise old eyes to Silverjaw, the ferocity of her gaze softening ever so slightly. "Isn't that right?"

Silverjaw's mouth bobbed, suddenly at a loss for words. An active fight with the rogues. Her mind flickered back to the night of Owlpaw's death—the innumerable shapes writhing through the shadows. The agony of dozens of claws piercing her flesh. She sucked in a swift breath, realizing she had been holding it.

"I—" She struggled to calm her breathing. There was a patrol being ambushed. She might be the tipping point between life or

death. "Y-Yes, of course I'll go. Let's get Wishfern, we'll need her."

Lichenpaw nodded and darted off to the medicine den. Moments later, Wishfern bustled out, a bundle of herbs already swinging from her jaws. She curtly nodded at the gathered she-cats, and with a lash of her tail, Lichenpaw led the haphazard party out of camp.

Chapter Eighteen

[image]

The patrol accelerated to a run, urgently evading the ice-cold rivers, leaping over frozen streams, and ignoring the temptation of curious prey, making their way across the territory as swiftly as they could without bringing damage to Wishfern's herbs.

A familiar anxiety clawed its way up Silverjaw's throat as the stench of blood permeated the air, acridly mixing with a familiar, heart-wrenching stench. Her heart skipped a beat as the horrors of the night swamped over her, nearly halting her in her tracks, especially as the stretch of territory became painfully familiar.

Just beyond these trees, there will be a rotten tree stump... She shuddered, recalling the feel of the slimy bark under her claws, the uncertainty in Owlpaw's eyes. It was the border they'd hesitated at. The border she'd been so eager to penetrate, while her brother failed in convincing her to leave.

A decision that had gotten him killed.

"Silverjaw, look out!"

Silverjaw skidded to a halt just as a pair of claws closed around the back of her neck. She gasped, dropped to the ground and twisted wildly. She kicked at her attacker's stomach, the sharp pricks of claw-tips against her throat making her eyes stretch with fear. Heatfur rushed over and hauled the tom away, snarls erupting through the sky as the large she-cat flung attacks at the similarly sized rogue.

"Keep going! I'll hold this one off," the ginger warrior hissed.

Scrambling to her paws, Silverjaw pushed into a clearing with Lichenpaw and Wishfern by her side. Spiderfrost stood, panic clear in her one eye and carrying a limp paw by her stomach. Nightpatch lay beside her, unconscious and bleeding profusely from dozens of

wounds.

A beautiful tortoiseshell rogue lunged and tackled the one-eyed warrior, the two rolling in a mess through the snow.

"Nightpatch!" Lichenpaw cried, charging into the clearing. She dropped by her mentor's side, touching her nose to his thick black-and-white pelt. She shot her wild, blue-eyed stare back towards the patrol. "Wishfern, he's still breathing!"

Wishfern raced to join the black apprentice, her paws working quickly to unwind her bundle of herbs. Lashing her tail, Silverjaw's gaze flashed about the clearing. The only other rogue she could spot was the tortoiseshell, who appeared to be winning the fight with Spiderfrost, ruthlessly using the ginger warrior's blind spot to her advantage.

Wasting no more time, Silverjaw leaped on the tortoiseshell's back. The rogue collapsed to the ground, but she was nimble and managed to slip out of Silverjaw's grasp. She flashed a claw across Silverjaw's cheek, scoring her talons deep into the flesh of the silver tabby's scar. Silverjaw yowled, squeezing her eye shut against the pain, blood piercing her vision. In retaliation, she gouged her claws deep inside the rogue's shoulders, heaving her to the crimson-dyed snow.

Silverjaw fought to pin the she-cat, a snarl vibrating through her chest. The rogue clawed at Silverjaw's underbelly and snapped her teeth, narrowly missing her throat. Spittle flew from her mouth.

"There's another one!" Spiderfrost cried.

Silverjaw rolled out of the way in the nick of time as another rogue flung at her. She cuffed her claws across his side and turned to see Spiderfrost racing to assist, while behind her, Wishfern urgently cleaned and mended Nightpatch's wounds with Lichenpaw's assistance, her ears attentively flicking in all directions.

Pressing their flanks together to guard one another's blind spots, Spiderfrost and Silverjaw pushed against the duo of rogues, working in perfect synchronization as they'd been trained to. Silverjaw

clenched her teeth as she remembered her apprenticeship. She and Owlpaw had stuck to the Training Pool instead of finding themselves a meal, working together to perfect this exact move.

The rogues exchanged glances as slowly, their fur grew battered and beaten due to their uncoordinated defenses. The tortoiseshell spat furiously, and spinning around, she fled back to the border, the yellow tom at her tail.

Silverjaw stared after them with her hackles raised for what felt like moons until she finally heaved a sigh of relief, rubbing a paw across her eye. Worry twisted in her chest; she'd been lucky it hadn't been damaged in her first battle, but would it be fine this time? She looked at her bloody paw, unease growing in her gut. It didn't hurt too terribly. Perhaps it was just a scratch.

"Thank you," Spiderfrost murmured, dropping to her haunches and giving her flank a brisk lick. "They nearly had me."

Silverjaw nodded wordlessly, her eye following the trail of blood into the trees. "Was there anybody else on the patrol?"

Spiderfrost paused in her lapping. "It was me, Lichenpaw, Nightpatch, and..." she froze. "Stonefur was here, too. Where's Stonefur?"

Silverjaw's head snapped up, and she scanned the undergrowth. "Let's check this way," she mewed, immediately moving in the direction the rogues had fled.

Spiderfrost followed, urgency in her limp as the two warriors pressed through the undergrowth. A screech cut the air, prompting them to run. They emerged into another small clearing. Stonefur was lunging after the tortoiseshell rogue. Midway through his pounce, his body spasmed and he reeled off to the side, landing on the ground with a painful thump.

The tortoiseshell glanced at the arriving she-cats and swiftly vanished. Silverjaw darted forward. Stonefur scrambled to his paws, heaving for breath, red spittle decorating his muzzle.

"Don't!" Silverjaw hissed, blocking the tom's path as he fought to lunge past her. "You're too hurt."

A long gash snaked along Stonefur's stomach and towards his chest, oozing thick crimson. "I need to stop them!" He hissed indignantly.

"No, you don't," Spiderfrost mewed shakily, weaving around him and giving him a lick between the ears. "Wishfern is here. You need to see her."

Stonefur's shoulders sagged. "She is?"

"That's right." Spiderfrost blinked slowly. Her words, soft as they were, grew dopey.

Concern sparked in Silverjaw's mind. She gave the ginger warrior a long look out of the corner of her eye. Following her was a blood-streaked trail, thick and dark, steadily growing as her injuries continued to bleed.

"You *both* need to get to Wishfern," she mewed, careful with her tone.

Stonefur nodded begrudgingly. Silverjaw pressed up against the tom's side, taking his full weight. Spiderfrost took up position on his opposing side. As if the tom knew of her equally poor condition, he maintained his balance primarily on the silver warrior's shoulders.

The three stumbled back into the clearing where Wishfern was urgently trying to stop Nightpatch's bleeding. Lichenpaw was beside the medicine cat, her blue eyes bright with fear.

"Wishfern," Silverjaw called out. "I think Spiderfrost has lost too much blood, and Stonefur's injury is severe."

Wishfern, her paws still firmly against Nightpatch's blood-soaked fur, glanced over. She cursed under her breath. "Lichenpaw, please press your paws against these cobwebs." Lichenpaw did as instructed. "Now," Wishfern pressed her paw atop the apprentice's, "hold this firmly. Yes, that's right. Keep doing that until I tell you not to."

The white medicine cat grabbed her bundle of herbs and raced to Silverjaw. "Have you applied cobwebs to an injury before?" She mewed briskly.

Silverjaw shook her head.

"Here," Wishfern scooped up a bundle of cobwebs and crammed them into the pad of Silverjaw's paw. "Take these and do your best to apply them to Spiderfrost's injuries. I'll handle Stonefur and help you once I'm done. Make sure to cover all corners of the wound."

Her amber eyes shone anxiously as she met her gaze to Silverjaw's. Swallowing her fear, Silverjaw nodded.

As the white medicine cat scurried off to save Stonefur's life, Silverjaw brought her attention to the bleeding Spiderfrost before her. The ginger warrior was sitting now, panting heavily, while her eyes were glazing over as unconsciousness threatened to take her.

"Silverjaw, I'm... I'm not feeling too good," the she-cat mewed weakly.

"Lie down," Silverjaw meowed sternly, struggling to keep her voice calm.

She scanned the warrior's body. Her deepest wound penetrated from her neck and along her upper shoulder, leaking a steady flow of blood so thick, it made Silverjaw's stomach twist with nerves and panic cloud her mind.

She fought through the darkness and struggled to focus on the present task. As she slicked the webs onto the warrior's bloody fur, they slid straight off. She attempted again, but yielded the same results. "Th-They're not sticking," she panicked, looking at her scarlet-stained paw. "Wishfern, they're not sticking!"

"Stick the edges to her dry fur," the medicine cat snapped as she tended rapidly to Stonefur. "Remember, I can't help you right now."

Taking a deep, rattly breath, Silverjaw patted the edge on the lower area of Spiderfrost's wound where her fur remained mostly dry, then stretched it across towards the top, sticking it to the fur up

there. She pressed firmly to ensure it stuck, then continued the process along the length of the wound. Stick, stretch, press.

Spiderfrost began mumbling incoherently, her tongue rasping across her lips periodically. "I'm... thirsty," she mumbled.

"We'll get you water soon," Silverjaw promised shakily.

Her vision danced between clarity and blurriness. Fear was threatening to take over, but she clung to reality with a viselike grip, holding to her focus as she pressed her coated paws against hot blood. The thought that she held Spiderfrost's life in her paws terrified her. A single slip-up and the weakening warrior would be gone. Just like Owlpaw and Sorrelmouse.

Before she knew it, Wishfern had returned to her side.

"Well done," the medicine cat praised, nudging Silverjaw aside with her red-stained paws. "Go fetch three wads of water-soaked moss. They'll need to hydrate after losing so much blood."

"Y-Yes, Wishfern." Silverjaw stumbled back.

Gathering her focus, Silverjaw bounded away, pushing away every ounce of fear as she raced towards the river. Spotting a mossy boulder, she stopped only for a moment to gather up a few mouthfuls, then continued on. She reached the sluggish bank and dipped the moss in, soaking up every droplet she could, before spinning around and racing back towards her injured Clanmates.

She exploded into the clearing and gave the wads to Wishfern. She watched anxiously as the white medicine cat gave some to each cat. Spiderfrost, though sluggish, greedily lapped it up, while Wishfern had to nurse it into the mouths of the unconscious Stonefur and Nightpatch.

Heatfur was sitting with Lichenpaw, her thick pelt snared with blood, though it had already stopped bleeding. She was watching her fretting sister through a furrowed brow, her jaw clenched and tail draped over Lichenpaw's trembling shoulders.

"We need to get them back to camp," Wishfern said, lashing her tail.

"Silverjaw, do you think you can support Nightpatch's weight?"

Silverjaw clenched her jaw. "I can try."

"Good. Heatfur, you'll carry Stonefur, while Lichenpaw and I will help Spiderfrost walk."

"I can walk just fine," Spiderfrost protested feebly, hobbling to her paws. To prove a point, she took a step forward, but her injured paw buckled under the weight of her body.

Wishfern caught her with a pointed scowl. "I *said,* we'll help you walk."

Spiderfrost quietly mumbled her agreement. Wishfern and Heatfur worked together to sling Nightpatch across Silverjaw's shoulders, then Heatfur carefully lifted Stonefur.

Giving a satisfied nod, Wishfern took the lead, guiding the warriors back towards camp, their pace much slower than the initial run.

Silverjaw's legs wobbled under the weight of her Clanmate, her vision blurring in and out of focus. His body fought to crush her to the ground, and his fur pierced against her wounds. She could feel dizziness threatening to overtake her, and the shallowness of her breathing nearly felt fueled by her heart, bringing a frightening darkness to the corners of her vision.

Once they reached the crossing stones, Silverjaw anxiously hung back as the rest of the patrol hobbled across. Sucking in a deep breath, she leaped onto a stone.

She dug her claws fiercely into the hard surface, clinging so firmly, her knuckles pulsated. She took a moment to steady herself and Nightpatch's limp body before leaping to the next stone. Icy water licked at her toes and threatened to overbear her, but by some miracle, she made it safely to the other side.

Lichenpaw stood by the camp entrance and scurried towards Silverjaw's side, her eyes shining with worry as she gave Nightpatch's nose a ginger sniff. "I'll help," she whispered, pressing up on Silverjaw's flank.

"Thank you," the silver warrior gasped.

The two squeezed through the twisted reed barrier and emerged into camp.

"Set him down where you can," Wishfern ordered, carefully sliding Stonefur down from Heatfur's shoulders. "I'll fetch some herbs. In the meantime, you three had best clean your injuries."

Silverjaw obeyed the medicine cat's orders. Once she carefully lowered Nightpatch from her back and stretched the stiffness from her limbs, she licked a paw and drew it across her stinging, bloody cheek. Finished with that, she leaned to her side and lapped at her belly. It was a bloody mess, but the scratches were shallow and not as bad as they'd initially appeared.

Shock rolled in waves through her body, following the steady rasps of her tongue. She breathed deeply in a futile attempt to steel herself, but her blood still roared in her ears. The camp was quiet, aside from the incessant fretting of Ravenfire and the moans of the injured.

Wishfern eventually came over to survey Nightpatch's injuries, reapplying a more complicated poultice and patting them down in a denser layer of webs. She turned to Stonefur and Spiderfrost, then had Silverjaw and Heatfur assist in carrying the unconscious to her den, where they were settled into their nests. Only then did Wishfern turn to evaluate the rest.

The medicine cat attended to Lichenpaw first, courtesy of her worse injuries and Ravenfire's demands, then Silverjaw. With a swathe of cobwebs and a poultice slathered over her paw, she dressed the warrior's wounds with quiet efficiency.

She reached up to the scratch above Silverjaw's eye. "Keep this injury as clean as you can. If it gets infected, it may affect your vision," she warned.

Silverjaw nodded stiffly. She sat patiently as Wishfern dressed her wounds, before the white she-cat at last turned to her sister, who looked to be in the best shape of them all.

"You're all very lucky," Wishfern mewed as she wrapped a cobweb over Heatfur's paw. "If there had been any more rogues, the tides of battle would've been turned against us. It wouldn't have been pretty."

Silverjaw's stomach flipped. "I know," she whispered, terror creeping into her voice.

"Will Nightpatch be okay?" Lichenpaw mewed anxiously.

Wishfern was quiet for a moment. "I can't promise a thing, but I'll do everything in my power to save him."

Lichenpaw's face fell, and Ravenfire draped her tail over her shoulders. "Come with me," she murmured. "Let's find something to eat."

Guilt squirmed in Silverjaw's chest as the elder guided the apprentice away. Lichenpaw's blue eyes shone with a layer of tears.

Shaking out her fur, Silverjaw rose to her paws and padded away, leaving Wishfern with Heatfur. She was surprised Dappledfang hadn't roused from the ruckus, but if he was as sick as she'd been when she'd fallen ill, it would make sense. With a heavy sigh, she flopped to her side in a corner beneath the shade of the willow tree, resting her chin on her paws.

It took a while for her to tussle with her adrenaline, but eventually, the last of her leaping energy began to wane, only to be replaced with squirrels of anxiety. The battle replayed in her mind dozens of times; if she'd gone out to find Stonefur sooner, would he have stayed conscious? If she hadn't hesitated when Lichenpaw had arrived for help, would Nightpatch be okay? And worst of all... what if she could've done something to prevent the attack in the first place?

Silverjaw groaned, rubbing a paw over her eyes. She winced as she pressed against the injury on her forehead, which only swelled her troubles more. *And what if I lose my eye? What then?*

Her worries were cast away by a fuss at the camp entrance.

"Get Wishfern, now!" A voice shouted.

Silverjaw bolted to her feet, shock skyrocketing through her body as Crowspots thrust into camp, a limp figure strung across her back.

It was... *Paledusk.*

Behind the older warrior limped in Pinestar, blood caked across his shoulder and his eyes clouded over with pain. Salmonskip was the leader's primary support, pressed against the tom's side with a clenched jaw. On Pinestar's other flank was Robinleap, who appeared to be in worse condition, but pushed himself to help his leader regardless.

They were followed closely by Honeywhisker, Minnowstripe, Mistpaw, and Toadpaw. They weren't too terribly wounded in comparison to their Clanmates, but their downcast expressions spoke wonders.

Befuddled, Silverjaw's eyes roved over the patrol. She managed to briefly catch Mistpaw's eye. The black apprentice merely shook her head and continued following the rest of the patrol.

The group of bedraggled cats met with Wishfern just outside the medicine den. She urged the ones with the worst injuries inside, uttering a quick mouthful of words to the rest before following them in.

A confused silence claimed the air, tainted by the stench of blood and fear.

❀

Later that evening, with the sun setting, Silverjaw found herself sitting outside the warrior's den. The vigil for the warriors who died had passed swiftly. Their bodies rested in the clearing, awaiting their burial and absent of loved ones. Their injuries had been too much for most cats to bear.

Silverjaw struggled to wrap her head around it herself. After all, she'd just hunted with them today. How could it be true that they, too, were gone?

She flicked her tail and struggled to keep her sorrow at bay. She was on the brink of losing herself to her grief, the faces of her brother and mentor swimming in the back of her mind, now joined by the senior Paledusk and his young companion, Robinleap.

A sound tugged at her throat, begging to escape, but she kept it down, afraid of what her Clanmates would think of her. Instead, she curled her claws into the earth, kneading in and out in surges to the beat of her heart.

"Silverjaw? Are you all right?"

Silverjaw looked up to see Mistpaw approaching her, the dark apprentice's green eyes round with concern.

"Am I?" Silverjaw muttered, drawing her paws together and sheathing them. "I honestly don't know anymore."

Mistpaw plopped down beside her, their flanks pressing together. "Lichenpaw's freaking out," she said. "I don't know what to do to help her."

Silverjaw glanced to her friend. "Because of Nightpatch?"

"Yeah," Mistpaw sighed.

"He's still alive, at least. There's comfort in that."

"But will he *stay* alive?" Mistpaw retorted dully.

Silverjaw flattened her ears at the thought. "I hope so." *I can't bear the thought of another death.*

Mistpaw sighed, her shoulders sagging. "Me, too."

The she-cats sat together in silence. It wasn't long until Toadpaw joined them, quietly pressing up on Silverjaw's other side. She leaned further against him, the softness of his fur bringing solace to the battle in her mind.

Together, the three cats sat, allowing the weight of the day's events to settle over them.

❀

Hey everybody, thank you so much for waiting for an update! I wrote these last two chapters nearly a year ago and wanted to post them once I finished the whole story. Sadly, however, my life has been unbelievably busy with work, school, and other such obligations, which has given me next to no free time. In return, I haven't been able to write.

I 100% intend to finish this story one day. Even though it has it's flaws, I still love it and have been working on it for years at this point—so there's no way I'm going to abandon it!

In the meantime, I'll likely *attempt* to make more art for the characters in here, which you can view in my Art Book, though postings may be slim.

Lastly, I would like to push out a gentle reminder that a lot of the art in here wasn't made by me! There are dozens of talented artists who contributed to the chapter art, and they're all linked on my ToyHouse (https://toyhou.se/kittennoodle) with the corresponding artworks.

Thanks for reading!
~ Kitten